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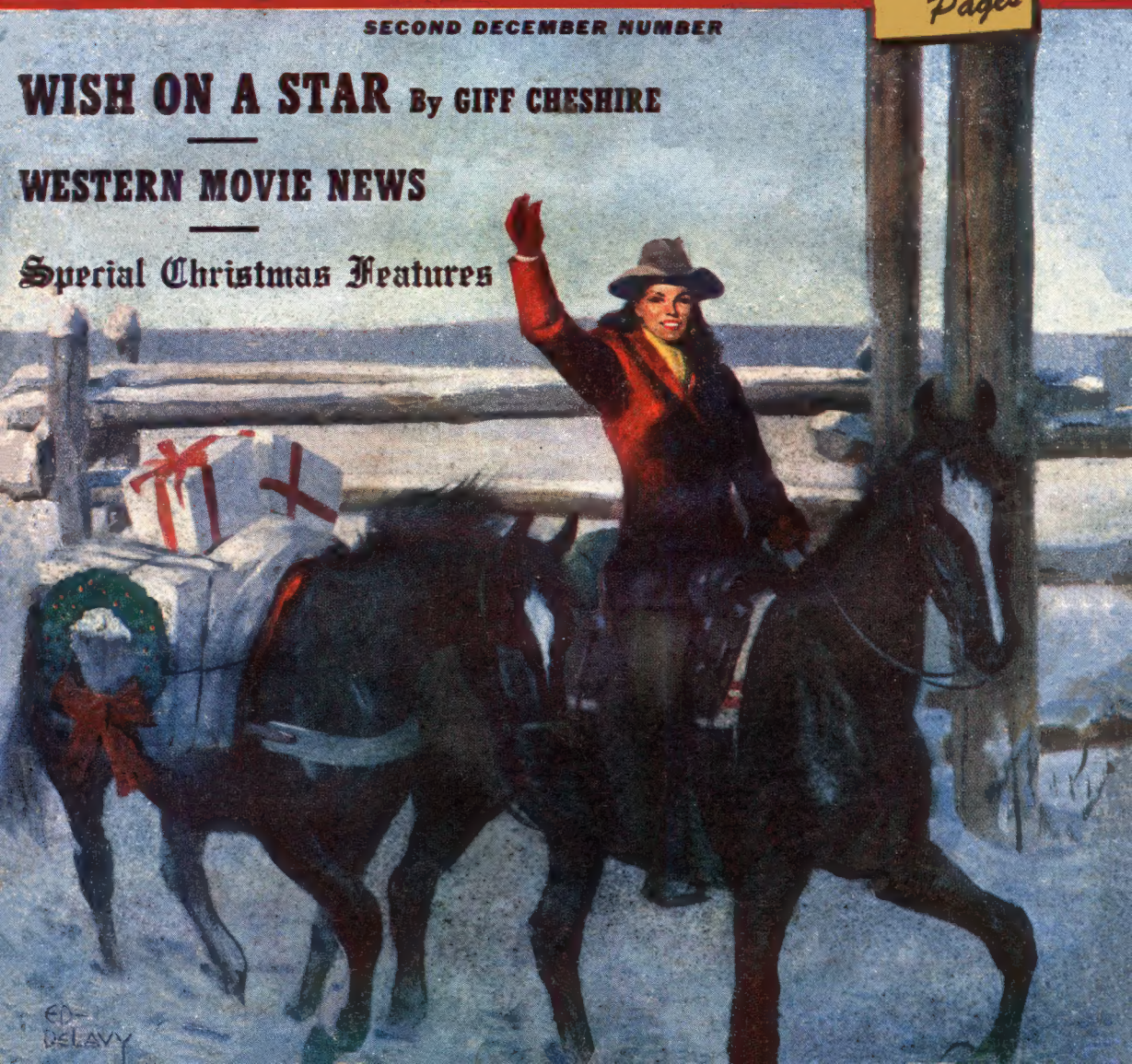

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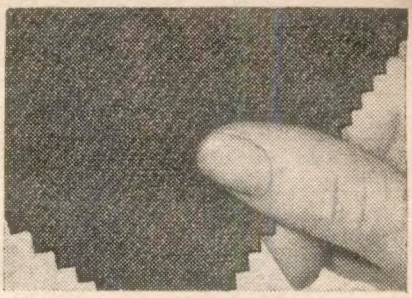

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*SECOND DECEMBER NUMBER*

December 22, 1950
Volume 162, Number 3

# RANCH ROMANCES

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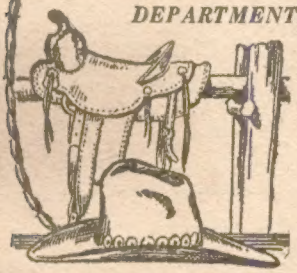

FANNY ELLSWORTH
*Editor*

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**Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

### Promises to Answer

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea as I am a fan of RANCH ROMANCES and I enjoy it very much. I am a very lonely girl here in Ketchum, and some letters would help a lot. I wrote to several pals, but never received any answer to my letters. I am 29 years of age with blue eyes and brown hair. I weigh 109 lbs. and stand a little over 5'. I promise to answer every letter I receive.

HAZEL CARMAN

P. O. Box 83, Ketchum, Okla.

### Away from Home

Dear Editor:

How about a girl of 19 years of age asking for space in OUR AIR MAIL I work in a city away from home, and get very lonely. So come on, you girls and fellows, write me. I'll answer each and every letter I receive.

BETTY JEAN BUMAGER

5035 Maple
St. Louis, Mo.

### Don't Forget Me

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl of 16 years of age. I am 5'3" tall with blond hair and blue eyes. I weigh 115 lbs. I like all kinds of sports, and especially like letter writing. Will exchange snapshots with any one who wishes. I promise to answer all letters I receive.

LILLIAN FRANKS

Route #1
Coosa, Ga.

### Farm Girl

Dear Editor:

RANCH ROMANCES sure hits the spot as far as I am concerned. And it seems to be getting better all the time. I've tried before to have my letter published, but no luck. I hope I succeed this time. I am 17 years old and am 5'6½" tall. I weigh 123 lbs. and have light reddish-brown hair and hazel eyes. I live on a farm, and if I can't figure out something to keep me busy, my parents assist. But I'll always have plenty of time

*(Continued on page 8)*

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# OUR AIR MAIL

*(Continued from page 6)*

to answer letters from all the swell guys and gals I hope will write.

My hobbies are reading, drawing and singing. I collect words to songs and also records. Well, I hope someone will be kind enough to write a note to me. Hoping to hear from people from all over the world.

BARBARA VREDEVOOGD

8482 Beers Road
Swartz Creek, Mich.

### Wishing for Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

I am wishing and hoping for some pen pals, so please be kind to a lonely Kansas girl and print my humble plea. I love to write letters and I would like to write to cowboys and city girls between the ages of 16 and 20. I am a 16-year-old girl and have blond hair and blue eyes. I am 5'5" tall and weigh 117 lbs. I promise to answer every letter I receive and will exchange snapshots. So come on, please write. I truly think that RANCH ROMANCES is the best Western magazine I've ever read, so keep up the good work.

GLENDA SCHWARZ

Herndon, Kans.

### Widow

Dear Editor:

Please enter my plea for pen pals. I am a 38-year-old widow. I love to hunt and fish. I like Western life and also Western music. I will tell you all about the Roundup city. I would like to hear from pen pals about my own age of either sex.

HELEN JENNINGS

459 S.W. Fourth
Pendleton, Ore.

### Sings and Yodels

Dear Editor:

If I don't see my letter in RANCH ROMANCES pretty soon, I'm apt to do a little "cussin'."

I am almost 16 years of age, 5'1" tall and weigh 114 lbs. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I love guitar music and I sing and yodel. I would like to hear from boys and girls who live in the states of Texas, Montana, Nevada and all other Western states. I'm quite lonesome, so won't you all please write to me.

RENO PORTER

R.F.D. #1
Ashland, Me.

### Collects Snapshots

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to have some pen pals. I am 14 years of age with blue eyes and brown hair. I am 5'3" tall and weigh 110 lbs. I am very lonely since my father died. I like almost everything. I have a weakness for horses. My hobbies are collecting snapshots of people, riding and letter writing. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots. Come on, boys and girls, fill this lonely girl's box.

ROBERTA BRUMETT

Route 2, Box 94
Yucaipa, Calif.

### Prompt Reply

Dear Editor:

I have tried several times to get my plea for pen pals printed. I have not succeeded yet. I am 14 years old, 5'3" tall and weigh 95 lbs. I have blond hair and brown eyes. My favorite pastimes are reading, going to the movies and listening to the radio. I will be glad to exchange snapshots and will answer all letters promptly.

CAROLYN WILLIAMS

Route 1
Bradford, Tenn.

### Plea for Pals

Dear Editor:

I hail from good old Arkansas and am making an urgent plea for pen pals. Won't you please print my letter? I am only 13 years old, 5' 6½" tall and weigh 99 lbs. I have brown hair and green eyes. My hobbies are reading, music and going to the movies. Come on, boys and girls from the ages of 12 to 20, fill up my mailbox, and I will answer every letter as quickly as possible.

BETTY LOU POSEY

Route 1, Box 133
Sparkman, Ark.

### Draws Movie Stars

Dear Editor:

I am very anxious to have pen pals of all ages. I am 19 years of age and have blue eyes and brown hair. I love all sports. My hobbies are writing and drawing movie stars. I would like to hear from boys and girls who live in the West and on ranches, but any others shouldn't be afraid to write me. I'll be glad to exchange photos. Let's fill up my box. Okay?

RAY BECKER

Route 1
Corinth, Miss.

### First Timer

Dear Editor:

This is my first time writing to OUR AIR MAIL, and I hope those that see my letter will write to me. I'm a girl in the middle twenties, 5' 2½" tall and weigh 110 lbs. I have many hobbies and am always willing to learn new ideas. I will answer all letters from any state or country and will exchange snapshots.

LONNIE CORNEY

Route 2, Box A 1542
Ronton Wash.

### Fond Reader

Dear Editor:

I am a fond reader of RANCH ROMANCES and have just gotten back from town with a new issue. I enjoy writing and receiving letters, and would like to get in on your OUR AIR MAIL correspondence. I am 25 years old, 5' 10" tall and have black hair and brown eyes. I am a lover of all sports and love music. I would like to hear from anyone who loves to write letters. I will answer all letters and exchange photos.

MARVIN BURCHAM

Route 1
Peck, Mich.

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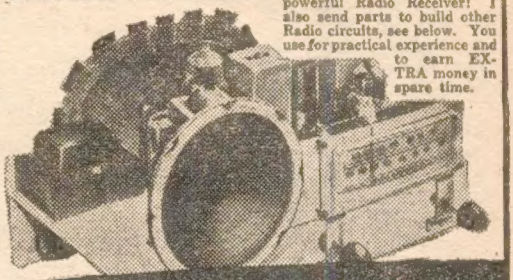

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# TRAIL DUST

**THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.**

AT THE HERMISTON, OREGON, state game farm there is a deer named Freddie who loves cigarettes. This is not so unusual, but the distinctive thing about Freddie is that he will accept only tailor-made cigarettes and, unlike cowboys, has no use for the home-rolled kind. Freddie requires no matches, either—he eats his cigarettes. Advertising men will be saddened to learn that he has shown no brand preference—any kind will do so long as they come in that crisp cellophane-wrapped package.

**FRYING EGGS on the sidewalk is an old gag, but a new wrinkle has just been reported from Fresno, California. When the heat kayoed the thermometer there at 105 degrees recently, the corn in Mrs. James Murad's backyard started to pop. The noise had the settlers ducking for cover until they realized it wasn't a battle. Mrs. Murad reported that the sun-popped corn looked exactly the same as if she'd made it over her kitchen range and tasted fine. Sure gets warm in the San Joaquin Valley in September.**

THE FOLKS had a fair in Rocky Ford, Colorado, recently—the Arkansas Valley Fair. Watermelon was served, and it is reliably reported that the crowd took just 35 minutes to demolish and devour a pile of 6,000 watermelons. So far's we're concerned we'll accept this as the championship watermelon-eating record of all time.

**ROBERT BEAVER, of Long Beach, California, ought to tell his wife. When daylight saving time ended he turned the clock back but neglected to warn Mrs. Beaver. She turned the clock back too. They were an hour late to church. Robert went home and turned the clock ahead an hour to correct it and forgot to tell the boss again. She turned it ahead another hour. He got to work an hour early next morning. We hope they've gotten together on it by now.**

OVER IN HORSESHOE BEND, Idaho, Thomas Benjamin Newell got his "greetings" from the President. Thomas was flattered that the army still wanted him. He is 81 years old. He was turned down for the Spanish-American war in 1898 because his shootin' eye wasn't too good, and by World Wars I and II he was already too old. Tom has a 21-year-old son of the same name, but if the greetings were for him the address was wrong. Junior has been in Japan for two years.

**THE HOLDUP BUSINESS is going to the dogs, at least in Van Nuys, California. An indignant citizen reported to the police that he had been held up by three men. They searched him and found only 65 cents in his pockets. So they took his lunchbox and ate his lunch. Maybe he should have invited them home for dinner?**

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**SAVE MONEY!**
There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

**Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!***

## JUST LOOK
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This remarkable Family Hospital Policy covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* kind of accident—and for *all* the common and rare diseases, and there are thousands of them. Serious diseases such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart diseases, diseases involving female organs, and abdominal operations are also fully covered after this policy is in force six months. Suicide, insanity, and venereal diseases are understandably excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. It is the kind of protection that will stand by you when emergency comes. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

### TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

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**Benefits At Small Extra Cost**
Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

**POLIO**
**Benefits At No Extra Cost**
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to ..... $500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
For Orthopedic Appliances, up to ... $500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

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Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

### This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

### Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

### 10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and licensed in other states. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

**PAYS CASH BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF ANY OTHER HOSPITAL INSURANCE YOU NOW HAVE!**

**FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON**
The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

**The Service Life Insurance Company**
**Hospital Department M-11 Omaha 2, Nebraska**

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

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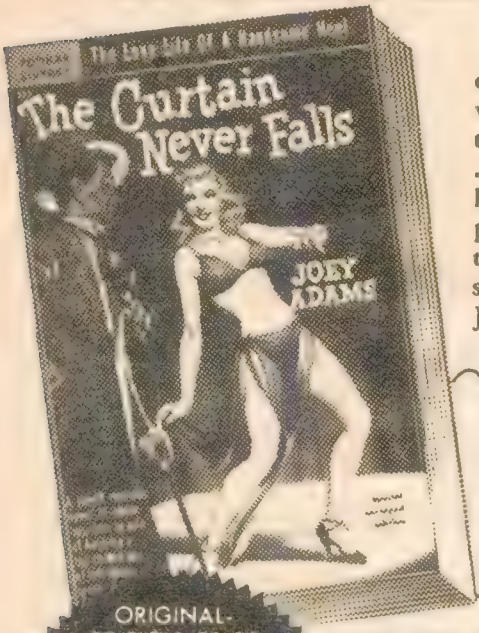
**SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY**
**Hospital Department M-11, Omaha 2, Nebraska**

# HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

## DID FAME GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO DO THIS?




We all know characters like Jackie, the comedian . . . ruthless, ambitious, not caring whom he steps on — just so he comes out on top. Love to Jackie was just lust and passion . . . and he never even waited long enough to hear the broken hearts crack. No punches are pulled in this fast-paced story about Jackie, the man who's on-stage all the time — and upstage at that! Don't miss finding out why, for Jackie, the curtain never falls!

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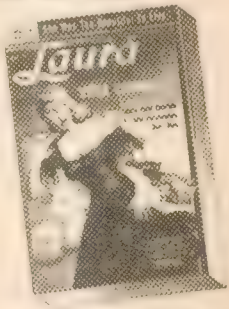


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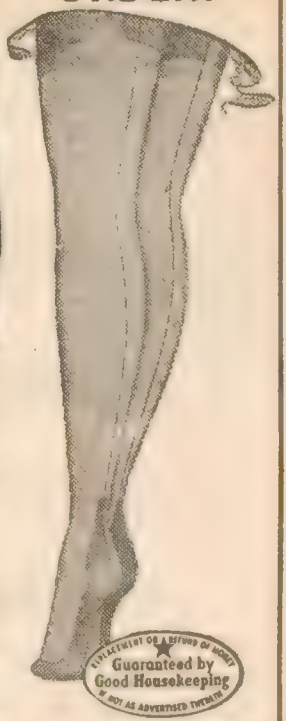


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# KENDEX CORPORATION • BABYLON 89, N. Y.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

# Dallas *with* GARY COOPER

***OUR REPORTER has a face-to-face interview with Coop***

COOPER'S back and Texas has got him! And to our way of thinking it's high time. Five years ago Gary Cooper made *Along Comes Jones,* and he hasn't forked a horse since—in front of a camera, that is.

Maybe you're a special fan of Autry's or Rogers' or Cassidy's, but try this trick: Close your eyes and visualize a typical Westerner. Don't you get a picture of a tall, lanky guy without much to say, whose smile is as slow as his guns are fast though the effects of both are about as devastating? If that's the kind of picture you get with your eyes shut, open them up and look at a movie called *Dallas,* and you'll see that image in the person of Gary Cooper.

Coop's a real Westerner, born in Helena, Mont., and bred on the range. His family treasures a snapshot of him at 17, wearing chaps and a checkered shirt, hands resting on the bone handles of two pistols.

After trying to sell advertising Coop broke into the movies as a stuntman. He got $25 for falling off a horse.

"Funny thing how a guy will risk his neck to keep himself in groceries," said Coop the other day. "If I suggested to a studio now that I take a fall off a horse, someone would jump right down my throat." Grinning he added, "My neck was just as valuable to me then as it is now."

He makes no secret of the fact that it was 25 years ago that he was cast in his first Western—a two-reeler that brought him parts in feature-length movies and finally an interview with B. P. Schulberg.

That was his first and only screen test—and no cameras were on hand and Coop

***This ought to be fun . . . for Gary Cooper and Ruth Roman***

*Warner Bros.' "Dallas" takes Gary Cooper back to the West*

never said a word. He went into Schulberg's office, gulped and grinned.

"That's all," said Schulberg, dismissing him. That was enough. Gary Cooper was headed for stardom. He played in society films and gangster movies, he starred with Clara Bow, Tallulah Bankhead and Sylvia Sydney. Most of the time, though, he made Westerns, and his fans loved them.

Except for six months in 1931 Gary has been steadily busy in the movies for a quarter of a century. And that half year was a trip to Africa for big game hunting.

A couple of years after he returned he married a beautiful girl, known to her New York society friends as Veronica Balfe, to movie fans as Sandra Shaw and to Gary, for 17 years so far, as Rocky. They have a daughter, Maria, 13.

Rocky gave up her own career when she married, but says Coop, "She's a tremendous help to mine."

She seldom gives advice, just talks things over with him. "We discuss who'd be the best actor to play any part I'm considering, and if we decide some other actor would be better, then I turn it down."

The Coopers are fond of such rugged sports as surfboard riding, hunting and fishing. You're likely to meet Gary on a mountain in Aspen, Colo., which is what your reporter did.

The Coopers have a lodg there, and it's a good place to chat with him, because he's more relaxed in the wide open spaces.

Don't think from this that he doesn't like Hollywood, though. "It's a wonderful place. It's been mighty good to me."

"But can't you think of any improvements you'd like to have made?"

"Just one," said Coop. "I wish actors had softer shoes to work in. It might be a little easier on our feet."

This department thinks there's a better solution for that problem than softer shoes. Just keep Coop up on his horse. That's even easier on the feet.

***BETH BRIGHT***

THE GIRL was very angry, the man amused. In a swift swing her brown hand splatted on the big rancher's cheek. The man caught her hand and held it, and the smile drained from his face. For a moment they stared at each other, and the man's eyes were not pleasant.

Joel Strachey stood in the doorway of his feed store and had been watching Maddy come down the street toward him for the call she always paid when downtown to do her day's buying. He started forward instantly, for he had heard Laz Tull's remark: "That's a hot wind, Maddy. Your daddy must be spinning a yarn." There had been a cruel, goading inflection in Tull's voice.

It was dangerous to take a jibe like that at Maddy Palmer. She had a basket of groceries on her free arm, and she let the handle slide down into her hand. She caught Tull completely by surprise when she swung the basket hard at his head. The man let go, staggering back under the impact. Joel caught the smell of whiskey as he came up, though Tull didn't need liquor to release the orneriness in him. He liked a ruckus any time.

"That ought to cool it off for you, Laz," Joel said.

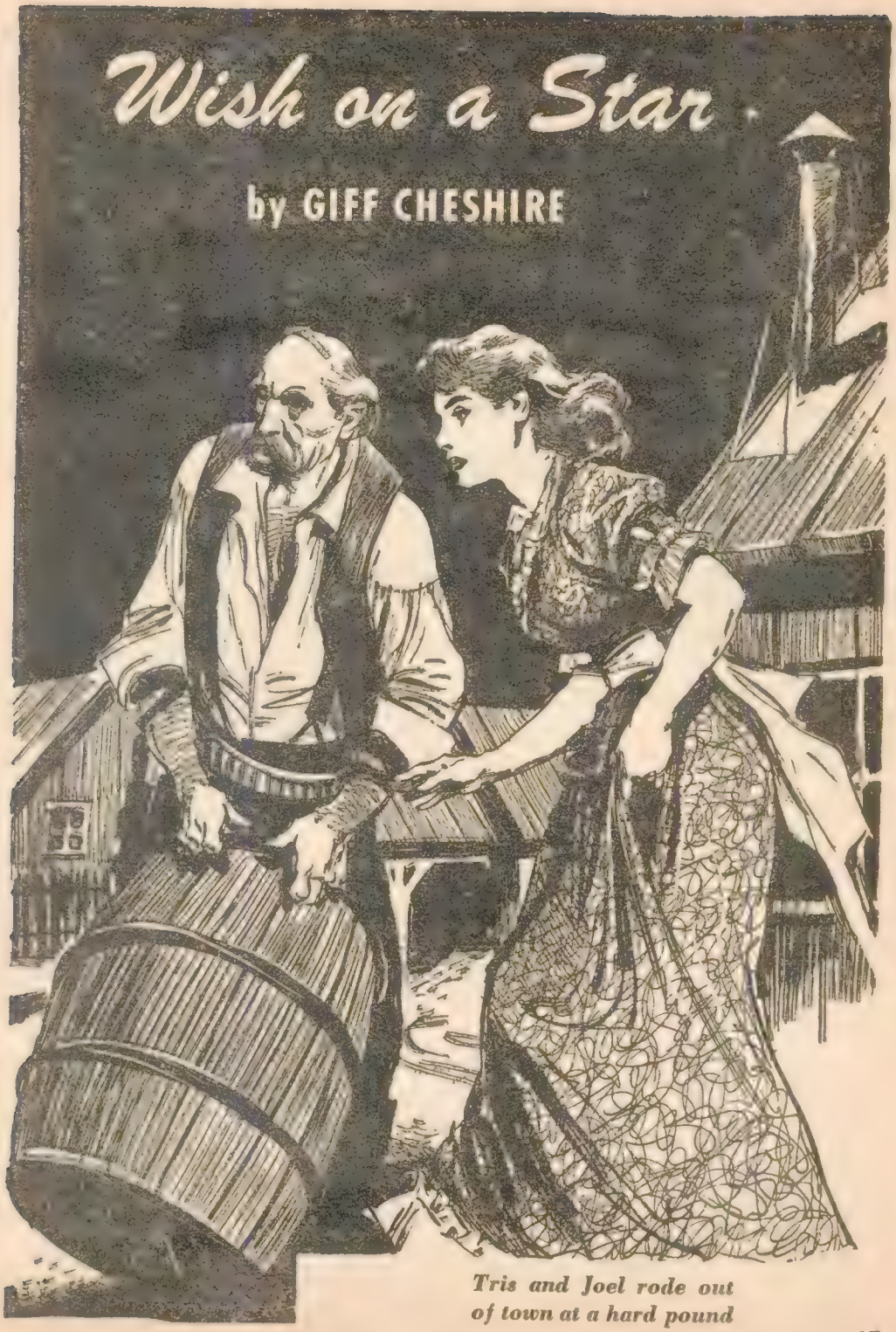
Tull hung motionless for a moment while his mind searched for an answer. His outfit lay next to the little spread Joel was buying for himself and Maddy, out in the droughted basin. Joel had had a lot of trouble with Tull's hard-bitten crew.

"You're the boy who can always find a laugh, ain't you?" Tull asked. "It strikes me, Joel, that one of these days I'll have one. I been hearing you're about to go broke." Tull swung suddenly, a quick, high and ungainly man, and went on down

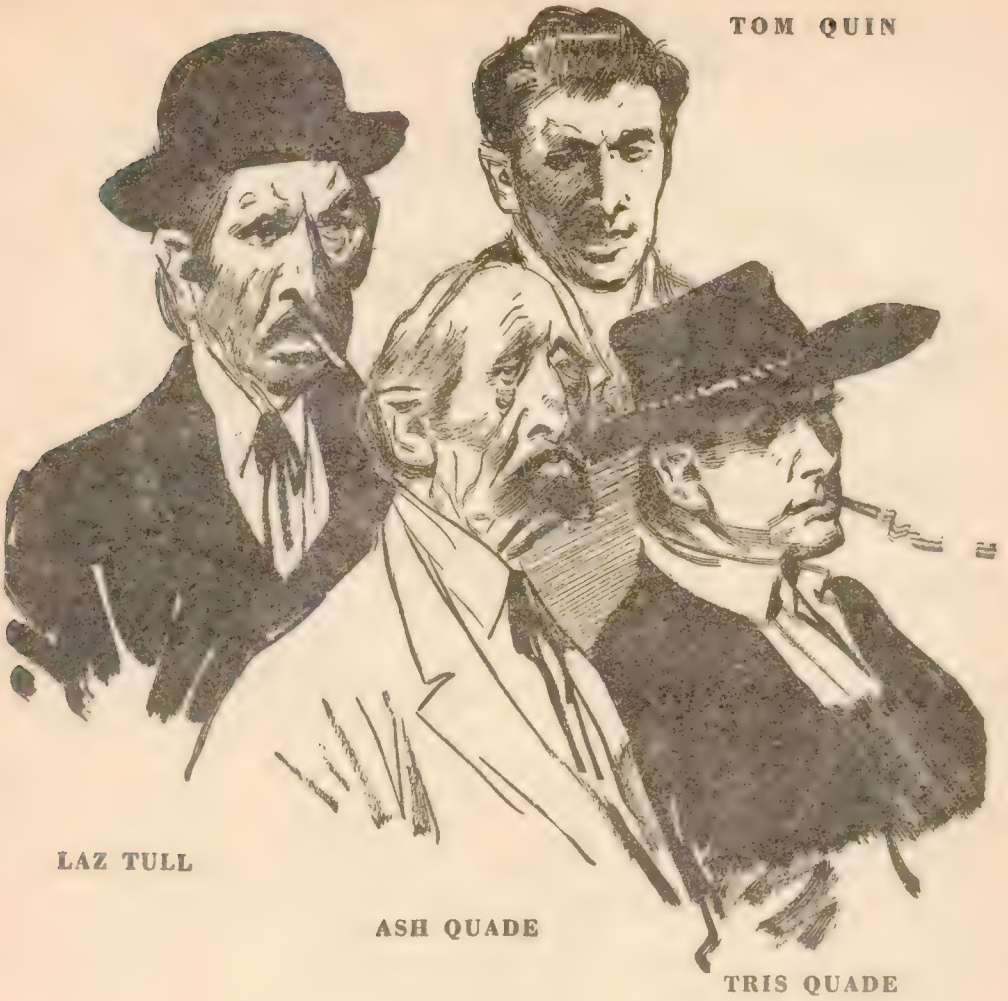
*JOEL CLUNG TO HIS star and Maddy to the earth beneath her pretty feet—yet their hearts met*

# Wish on a Star

by GIFF CHESHIRE



*Tris and Joel rode out of town at a hard pound*




the sidewalk. It was a gesture of contempt.

Joel stared after him. Joel was tall, with wide shoulders that wedged into slim hips. Now he stood straight, unmoving. That last remark had done to him what Tull's cut at Maddy Palmer had done to her. Joel kept his grin but his eyes were cold, his jaw suddenly set. Tull had crowded trouble with both of them for quite a while, as if he had singled them out for some kind of showdown. For the life of him, Joel couldn't see where that made sense.

"You didn't have to take it up," Maddy said. She was slight, slender, with the plainness of grooming only a very pretty girl will trust. Her glance swung up to meet his and was steady. She smiled, but the smile covered something in her eyes he did not like, as if she would have thought better of him if he had given Tull the beating he had long had coming. But Joel Strachey was a patient man. He liked people and hated bickering if it could be avoided.

He took the basket, which was heavy with the things Maddy had bought in the store just now. She ran the boarding house where he lived, but there was much more between them, the love that drew them together and the differences that were driving them apart. He saw trouble glimmer in her soft brown eyes now. Added to his

JOEL STRACHEY MADDY PALMER WINDY PALMER

financial troubles, which had them both concerned, a ruckus with Tull was a bad thing to have happen.

"You oughtn't let folks get you so prod-dy about your dad, Maddy," Joel said. "It only eggs on a man like Tull."

"Tull and a hundred others," Maddy answered hotly. "Windy Palmer may be full of hot air, the way Tull hinted, but he's worth Laz Tull and the basin to boot."

"You'll get no argument there," Joel said.

They had reached the door of the feed store, and Joel waited while she passed through. His eyes were soft as they dwelt on her, and he knew that without this girl his life wouldn't mean anything. But anger still seeped into her motions; anger at him, maybe, for not mopping up the sidewalk with Tull as she would have done had she been a man.

The chip she seemed always to wear on her shoulder came from old Windy, who was the town gaffer, a garrulous loafer and ne'er-do-well. Broken Axe considered him a plain public nuisance. Maddy was sensitive, even pugnacious about it, and it kept her on the outs with half the town.

A WAGON had pulled in to the walk in front of the feed store. Swinging a glance through the window, Joel recognized a nester called Wilkins from the Turkey Creek colony. Wilkins rid himself of tobacco juice and came in. Touching his hat to Maddy, he let his stolid glance cover the bare, hot room.

"See you've still got a sack of that egg mash, Strachey," he said. "We had to sell our wheat to pay the Mercantile. The missus is trying to bring on hens to help out. But the pesky things have got to eat, too. Mind letting me have that mash?"

Joel recognized the indirect request for credit, which he had heard so many times from nesters and cowmen alike. He straightened and saw a look of desperation flicker in Wilkins' eyes.

The nester's voice resumed with a dogged note. "I aim to veal a calf next month. The butcher says he'll take it. I could pay you then."

Joel saw Maddy's lips pull into a flat line. He said, "I've been trying to get on a cash basis, Wilkins. The wholesalers are crowding me about my own bills. They won't ship me anything else till I've paid up."

Wilkins sighed. "Yeah, I know. Heard you're as hard-pressed as the rest of us."

"Hard-pressed?" Maddy asked. "Well, I guess that's a nice way to put it."

Wilkins touched his hat to her again, turning. "Well, thanks anyhow, Strachey."

"Now, wait a minute," Joel said, though if Maddy hadn't put in her say he would have told Wilkins that granting more credit had become impossible. "That sack of mash is doing nobody any good laying here. I'll truck it out to your wagon."

Maddy wore a cool smile when Joel came back with the empty hand truck. "The man was shamed enough having to ask for time," he said. "I know something about Jud Wilkins. It was family sickness that put him behind with the Mercantile. That fellow worked day and night trying to get in a crop this year, and it all but failed. Having eggs to sell or eat themselves will make a big difference to them."

"Who hasn't got troubles nowdays?" Maddy asked. "How about you? The man who's given time here and time there till he's up to his ears in debt himself."

Joel threw up his hands. "Anyhow, that mash was doing nobody any good setting there in the corner."

Maddy picked up her basket, and he thought she would flounce out. But she paused to say, "Joel, who tries to help you? It seems to me there's a line between decent sympathy and foolishness. Your trouble is you can't stand to hear a hard luck story. If there's any way you can help you'll do it without considering yourself. That's fine if a person knows where that line is and draws it."

"Which I don't?" Joel asked thunderously.

"Wasn't Laz Tull right? Aren't you going broke because you've got too much on the books and can't collect it?"

"Isn't everyone else going broke in this basin?" Joel demanded. "They're people who give me their trade in good times. Where's the decency in dusting 'em off in bad times? I know it gravels you to see me in hot water with enough on the books to square up and then some. But nobody's got any money. That's the way it lays, and I don't know what can be done about it."

Maddy's voice softened, and she smiled. "You're right to stick to your principles, Joel, and I'm petty. I know that. But I also suspect that a lot of people owing you are stalling you, too, and paying bills where they're pressed harder."

Her smile, when she used it, was rich with the vitality in her. He had to return it, and he pulled in a breath that was tremulous. She turned quickly and went out, and he was glad that for the moment at least they had reached each other. He knew they were close to breaking after an engagement that had lasted four years. He also knew he was to blame. She had watched him sink deeper and deeper into debt, each passing crisis pushing the time when they could be married farther into the future.

JOEL went to his littered desk to make out a charge slip for Wilkins' purchase. He hadn't yet told Maddy about a letter that had come in on the previous day's stage. Its final lines were etched in his mind: "Unless the balance of this account is settled within thirty days we'll be obliged to take steps. . . ." He had dealt with this particular feed firm for seven years. The first time he had got behind with them they had shut off credit. Now they were threatening to go to law to collect the arrears. Certainly they knew where to draw this line of Maddy's and had lost no time about it.

Right here in Broken Axe the bank was giving no more loans without the usual security, and nobody had anything that wasn't already plastered to the limit. Three bad years in a row had practically cut off the basin's beef income. The mercantiles were forcing a man like Wilkins to sell his wheat and pay up so his family could eat through another winter. Everybody knew where Maddy's line lay, all right. Joel

guessed he knew himself but would never draw it, lacking the hard head required.

He locked up and turned toward the busier end of the street, moving at a loose gait, a fatigue showing that he was not aware of. He went past the bank without glancing at the door, angry at his reluctance to face facts and go in to ask for a loan. He went on to the next corner, and at the cross street he recognized old Windy Palmer on the gaffers' bench along the drugstore side wall. Windy was canted back, his old, high-peaked hat over his face, his thin, long legs stretched comfortably ahead of him. He seemed to be asleep. The emptiness of the whittled, rump-polished bench reached Joel in its conveyance of the old man's loneliness. It had got so that everyone shunned him.

Joel had stepped onto the far sidewalk when young Tris Quade came out of the brush on the adjoining lot. Without noticing Joel, Tris moved stealthily toward Windy, carrying an empty whiskey bottle he had rustled in the brush. He placed the bottle on the bench beside Windy's lax hand so that it looked as if the old man had drunk himself into a stupor. Tris moved away, grinning, for whiskey and its evils were one of Windy's leather-lunged themes.

Tris went across the street to where stood a couple of his buckaroo cronies. They all looked amused by his prank and leaned on the hitch-bar waiting to see Windy wake up.

Joel grinned at them, though he figured the joke had a sharp edge. Tris was the motherless only son of Ash Quade, the banker. He was twenty, a tall, curly-haired youngster with too easy a start in life. His father had tried at first to get him interested in the bank. Then, a year ago, Quade had done the next worse thing by setting him up on his own cow spread, fully equipped and stocked and so strongly backed that the boy felt no responsibility.

Joel saw suddenly that the prank had a special instigation. Maddy came out of the drugstore, turning toward him though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she didn't appear to see him. From habit she would take the cross-lot path and there notice her father. So Tris's joke was likely aimed at her as much as at Windy, for the boy must have seen her in the drugstore.

To keep her coming straight ahead, Joel called to her. She glanced toward him, but Joel saw he had also roused Windy. The old man lifted a hand and cuffed back his hat, the movement knocking the bottle off the bench. Windy yelled as if it had been a rattlesnake.

"What misguided son of Satan put that there?" he demanded of the whole town.

Maddy whirled just as her father picked up the bottle and hurled it at the grinning punchers on the far walk. It sailed past them and crashed against the big window of the stage office. The glass shattered. Windy charged across the street, his old arms brought up and the gnarled hands bunched into fists. The buckaroos turned and fled up the walk in mock fear.

At the same moment the stage agent emerged through his doorway, startled and angry. The man grabbed Windy and pulled him down. It did Joel good to see the old man knock the hand off his shoulder. Whatever the agent had in mind to say was forgotten under Windy's eagle-eyed glare. The man backed off.

MADDY went across the street with Joel following. "Have a new glass put in," Maddy wearily told the agent. "And tell them I'll pay the bill."

The man shrugged and went back inside. Maddy regarded her father with anger and sympathy mixed on her face. "Let's go home, Dad. Why must you take a nap downtown?"

Windy's head reared back. "I wasn't napping. Was only thinking."

"Thinking so hard you let those smarties make a fool of you?"

"Them pups," Windy snorted, "will have to get smarter yet to make a fool of Windy Palmer."

Maddy turned. "Are you coming home, Joel?"

Joel shook his head and watched them move away. Irritation bit him deeply. He swung about, heading for the bank. What he needed, he guessed, was some of Windy's precipitate action, however hopeless. He entered the place and strode solidly to the private office of Ash Quade. He opened the door so roughly the heavy, grey-featured man beyond a desk looked up with a startled stare.

"What the devil got into you?" Quade asked.

"Quade, I need a loan and a big one. To get me out of a jackpot I got in because I'm the only one in this town with a sense of obligation. I reckon you'll want security because you know where to draw the line. I've managed to whittle down the mortgage on my spread, and it's worth a lot more than you've got on it."

Quade laid down his pen and pushed his weight back in the chair. He said, "Let your hackles down and take a seat. It happens that you're right on both counts. I know where to draw the line, if you mean what I think. And your spread's worth more than I've got on it at present. . . ."

Joel walked halfway home in a swinging stride, but his steps began to falter as he neared the Palmer house. Though the increase on his mortgage might be better undivulged, he knew he would tell Maddy about it, for he liked to be open and aboveboard with her. But when he saw the saddle horse ground-tied before the house he came out of his thoughts. The horse bore the Lazy S, his own brand. He knew that Tom Quin, who ran the spread for him, had been energized by something important to have made the long ride to town at this season.

Tom was on the porch, listening to some yarn of Windy's, but he shoved to his feet in relief when he saw Joel angling across the rutted side street. He was young and stocky with a shock of crisp yellow hair.

Tom waited at the head of the steps and, when Joel came up, tipped a nod and said, "Seen you'd locked the store and figured you'd come home. Joel, we've got troubles."

"Now, look," Joel said, "if you're bringing new ones, Tom, you can go right home. I'm well fixed with same already."

Tom grinned, but his eyes showed no mirth. "This'll give you a change, anyhow. Laz Tull's been giving me grief again."

"Tull?" Joel pulled straight, and for a moment uneasiness stirred in him.

"Three times now," Tom said, "I've had to throw back stuff of theirs that's oozed onto our range. I'd bet the six months' pay you owe me it never drifted. This morning there was a good fifty T Rail steers at our east tank washing down our grass with our water."

"What did you do about it?"

"If them steers have stopped running by now, they're up on Tull's hill range. Then I rode over to T Rail and quoted gospel. But I figured I'd better tell you, Joel. They get a little nastier ever' trip. Something could come up on my blind side, working alone the way I do."

Joel was eased, because it didn't sound as bad as he had feared. "I'm going to have to tangle with Tull. Anything you need out there?"

"Yeah," Tom said. "The other one of the twins I should have been. Or some of my wages so I can get drunk before I go back."

"Reckon I can catch up your wages now, Tom," Joel said, though the puncher had spoken in jest. "And I'm obliged for the way you've waited. Come down to the store, and I'll give you a check."

"You find a mine?" Tom asked.

"Not exactly. Come on!"

WITH the other boarders, Joel had no chance to talk with Maddy at the supper table. He was late, for after he had given Tom Quin his back wages, he had lingered to write the checks that paid in full what he owed the feed wholesalers. There would be no stage to take the letters out for another two days, but it had given him satisfaction though nearly cleaning him out again.

He knew Maddy wanted a talk, for she kept watching him with guarded interest. So he dallied over coffee while the other boarders drifted from the dining room. Windy sensed friction and lingered, but rose finally and left.

Maddy gave Joel a long, flat stare. "Howcome you could catch up Tom's back wages at this particular time?"

"I borrowed some money."

She was quiet a moment, then said, "There's only one way you could have. A second mortgage on the ranch."

"A new one," Joel said, "and a bigger one. There was no other way."

The small head was held to the side the way it was when Maddy was angry. Joel might have known that Windy would report what had been said on the porch, and he was in a mood to tan the old man's patched levis.

"When do you have to make a payment on it?" Maddy asked.

"I've got three months."

"And how do you propose to meet it? By wishing on a star?"

Joel's fist hit the table so hard the dishes rattled. He stared into her eyes, but the closeness that had come between them for a moment at the feed store was wiped away. She was bitterly angry with him, maybe because he had not warned her of what he contemplated, or maybe because he had borrowed money instead of squeezing it out of his delinquent customers. Or maybe she figured he should have told the feed wholesalers to go ahead and sue.

"I can be wrong and mighty wrong," Joel said, "but there's one thing I think I've been right about. I make up my own mind without waiting for a woman to make it up for me. I always will, and if that don't suit you, you'd better hunt up some jigger who does."

"Maybe I had," Maddy said. She rose and marched into the kitchen.

At breakfast the next morning Joel said, "Windy, how would you like to ride out to Lazy S with me?"

"Why, sure," Windy said. He looked a little uneasy, for he was aware of the quarrel and wasn't sure but what he was blamed for helping to bring it on. "What we going to do out there?"

Joel gave him a wicked grin. "Settle a few scores, old-timer. There's underhanded work been going on against me. I aim to dig it out."

Even Maddy smiled a little at Windy's discomfort, his guilt at having told her something Joel might have wanted to keep under his hat. Her eyes held a question, but she said nothing because of the other boarders. Joel was not of a mind to relieve her curiosity after what had happened the night before.

Joel finished eating, then got his horse from the livery and hired one for Windy.

"What're we fixing to do?" Windy asked again.

"Look into this breeching from T Rail that had Tom worried."

Windy's sigh of relief was audible. Then, to restore himself to Joel's good graces, he said, "That Tull's a bad one. He sure gets relish outa stepping on somebody's toes. Here's one Ash Quade wouldn't like. I hear Tris has took to running with Tull. That kid's going to turn out bad. I hear—"

"You hear too blamed much," Joel said.

"I reckon." Windy sighed again. "But I did hear Tris and Tom had trouble, too."

"What over?" Joel asked with interest. The spread Ash Quade had bought for Tris lay next to Lazy S, across from Tull's T Rail.

"Tom didn't say except it was some orneriness the kid had picked up from Tull."

It was a fine morning. The full sun was not yet too warm. The blue sky had not yet assumed the coppery haze that could lay an awesome coloring upon the sage flats. Joel's horse had ginger, and he began to wonder why a man bothered to worry. He had three months to find his way out of his difficulties.

Lazy S lay in a high, hill-girt valley. As they topped the rise that gave onto this vista, a sense of satisfaction rose in Joel. His brand covered nearly six hundred whitefaces, as yet barely enough to support one man. But there would be more, for the home ranch comprised a substantial winter range and was augmented by the government leases that went with the spread by right of use and custom. It would eventually yield Maddy and him a good living, provided a number of things worked out right.

THE OWNER before Joel had been graced with a family. The house under the old cottonwoods was ample and pleasing. Dropping down the slant with Windy, Joel let his gaze play upon it appreciatively. There was no sign of Tom Quin, who would be sleeping off his town drunk if he had bought one, or was out on the day's riding. They came into the ranchyard without raising anybody and swung out of the saddle.

"I'll be blamed!" Windy said. "That there on the step looks like dried blood, Joel. So it is. Drips clean across the porch to the door."

Joel went across the porch in long strides. The door stood ajar and the dripped trail went on, an irregularly dotted line that raised the hair on his neck. He entered the kitchen, seeing the litter of the morning's cooking, though Tom was neat. He yelled for Tom, but the house sent back its empty echoes.

It was easy to decipher. Tom had gone to the wall behind the kitchen door and taken down his rifle, for the spots clustered there. He had passed on through the door to the other room. In the big living room Joel saw where the puncher had halted again to take shells from an open box on the table.

Windy was reading the sign in the same fear-struck way. "Somebody caught him without a gun and winged him. Tom come in and got the Winchester. He went out the front way to save hisself steps. Must have been this morning, right after breakfast, and something he was worried about took him out. Tom always cleans up after a meal. Maybe we can track his horse, Joel. We got to. Looks like he needed help."

Neither of them wore a gun for the day was past when a man couldn't ride his own range in confidence, and even Joel's hunting rifle was in town. The lack worried Joel. He strode out the front way, finding where Tom had struggled onto his horse again. Joel swung up, with Windy following suit. It was easy to discern Tom's trail.

The puncher had headed due east. Beyond a low rise in that direction lay the

graze where the steers had been held since roundup. Still farther lay Laz Tull's T Rail outfit. It looked bad.

Beyond the rise, Joel pointed suddenly. "Yonder's Tom's horse, with nothing but daylight in the saddle." His throat hurt. He knew that Tom hadn't been dumped there. The horse, its saddle empty, had come in to the water hole and then had started to graze. Joel rode up quietly and caught the horse. It's saddle was smeared with dried blood. He swung his own mount and streaked out toward the notch in the distant hills, the far side of which marked the T Rail boundary. He was a peaceful man, but now the peace had gone out of him.

He found Tom just short of the notch. The man lay face down on the hard, hot earth which was darkened under his chest. Joel swung down as Windy thundered in behind him.

Windy kept saddle, but he said, "There was a good man. Hit in the gizzard but he still went in to get his gun and come back to put up a fight. He was heading straight for T Rail. So there's where the answer lays, I reckon."

"There *is* a good man," Joel corrected, and his face lost some of its darkness. "He's got a pulse. Windy, spank your tail for Doc Slater. I'll get Tom to the house." But Windy had whirled the livery mare and was gone before Joel had finished.

The hours that followed were the longest Joel had ever put in. He got Tom across the saddle and led the horse to the house. Thereafter he carried Tom in to his bed, took a look at his wound and was apalled. He'd been wounded just the once, and the wound had drained his strength before he could carry out his purpose. The bullet hole was just outside the aureole of his right breast, and the slug had gone in between the ribs. His hands trembled, but Joel was a practical man and he got busy doing what he could for Tom.

FOR MANY hours it was a question of whether Tom would ever speak to tell what had happened to him. The doctor came in mid-afternoon, Windy with him, and stayed on through the night. In the early hours of the next morning Joel was beside the bed when Tom opened his eyes. It seemed to Joel that a weak grin flickered about the young puncher's lips in the lamplight.

Tom whispered, "If you had a hunch, it was a good one."

"Who shot you, Tom?"

"Dunno." Tom was silent for a moment. "Shows a bad habit can get a man killed. I been rushing out for a look at that east tank the first thing every morning, because I been finding T Rail steers there using our water. Wasn't none there this morning. But a shot come off the rim, though I never knew it till I come to. Was off my horse but I'd ground-tied it and it stood."

"So you got the Winchester and headed for T Rail. Was that just suspicions?"

Tom nodded. "Who else would have done it? I knew it riled 'em when I cussed 'em out. It was foolish, maybe, but a man can take only so much. Anyway, I didn't make it there."

[*Turn page*]

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"Bushwhacking seems a strong way to get even," Joel said.

"Nothing's too strong for Laz Tull's stomach."

"If it was T Rail that bushed you," Joel said, "it's because they've got fish to fry. I'll try and find out what when we've taken care of you."

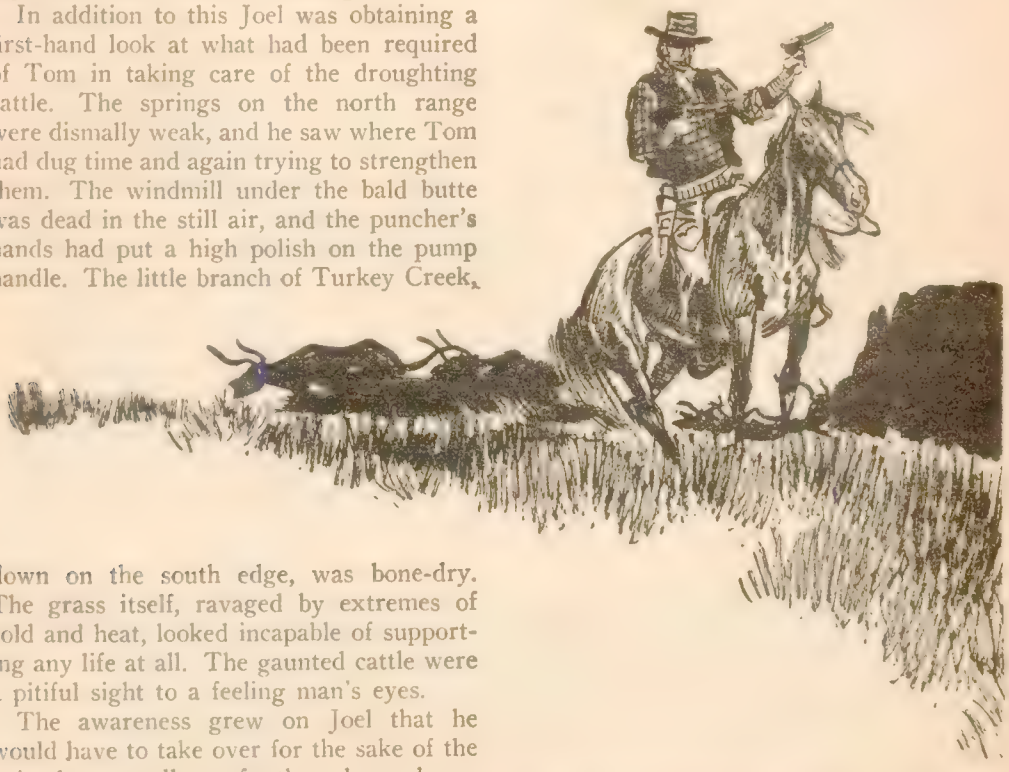
It was two days before the doctor considered it safe to move Tom to town. Meanwhile, leaving Windy with the hurt puncher, Joel rode out to the east tank and looked around. He found where Tom had fallen wounded and saw signs of the struggle he had had in getting onto his horse. Joel ascended to the bench and found where he figured the bushwhacker had waited to catch the unsuspecting rider in his sights. Something had been used to brush out the sign, and there was no following it now.

In addition to this Joel was obtaining a first-hand look at what had been required of Tom in taking care of the droughting cattle. The springs on the north range were dismally weak, and he saw where Tom had dug time and again trying to strengthen them. The windmill under the bald butte was dead in the still air, and the puncher's hands had put a high polish on the pump handle. The little branch of Turkey Creek, down on the south edge, was bone-dry. The grass itself, ravaged by extremes of cold and heat, looked incapable of supporting any life at all. The gaunted cattle were a pitiful sight to a feeling man's eyes.

The awareness grew on Joel that he would have to take over for the sake of the animals, regardless of other demands on his time. Pondering this, he wondered if it offered a motive for Tom's getting shot up. Ash Quade had a new mortgage on Lazy S with plenty of reason to doubt it could be kept up. Until there was a new beef roundup, nearly a year away, Joel would have to collect bad bills to meet the payments and his other expenses. Collecting the bills would be a full-time job, and Quade was the cold-blooded kind of jigger who might keep him from working at it.

Joel rode into Broken Axe with the buckboard and they put Tom to bed at Maddy Palmer's. Busy though she was with her boarders, she wouldn't hear to anything else. Afterward Joel went down to the feed store, printed a sign that said: Closed Until She's Open Again, which he tacked on the door.

He was returning to Maddy's when he saw Tris Quade emerge with Laz Tull from the Oxyoke saloon. The pair paused by the hitch-bar, intent in conversation, and didn't seem to notice Joel. The latter felt his neck pull tight at the sight of Tull's high-hipped and hulking figure. But he had



***The herd rumble grew louder. He drew a holster gun and pulled the trigger***

nothing but suspicion to go on, with an equal suspicion against Ash Quade, and it would be folly to give off head too soon. He turned the corner.

He had packed his things and come down the stairs when he encountered Maddy. She stared at the roll he carried.

"Where are you going?"

"Moving out to the spread. My cows approve of me. And me, I like them."

"So," Maddy breathed, "you'd best move right out there with them!" He knew she had meant to protest his neglect of the feed store and the bad bills that were his only hope of salvation. Now she said nothing but flounced off into another room.

Joel walked out with a feeling of regret. Beneath his stung pride lay a deep sympathy for her. Keeping boarders in a hot cow-town wasn't easy, nor was waiting for a man whose nature seemed to work against her constantly. He remembered that she hadn't even complained until it grew evident that it was all slipping away from them. He nearly turned back with an apology, then remembered what she had

said about his getting out of the trouble by wishing on a star. He marched on to his horse.

HE LASHED his roll to the cantle and, country-bound, was riding down the town's main street when Laz Tull called from the sidewalk, "You got a minute, Strachey?"

Joel reined over, his eyes cold as they met the man's masked gaze. Tris Quade was still there, and he looked uneasy.

"I hear Tom Quin got shot," Tull said. "Things have sure got a way of happening, ain't they?"

"Why, yeah," Joel replied. "But the thing that happened to Tom was unusual. It seems he's been bothered by your steers, Laz. And it seems he's been brushing with your punchers. His getting bushed strikes me as queer. Tom isn't a man to make enemies, and the kind he makes is a breed it ain't smart to turn your back on." He hadn't meant to declare himself yet, but his latest words with Maddy combined with Tull's insolent comment to start the words boiling out of him.

Tull had pulled up straight. Tris Quade lifted a hand and rubbed it slowly across his chin. The boy looked worried, deeply so. In that moment Joel was certain that something was up, and that both Tull and Tris knew what it was.

"Them's strong words," Tull said. "And you're a mile off the track. Sure, we've had trouble with Tom Quin. You're wrong about him being easy to get along with. Show that jigger the ghost of a bone and he's right there to pick it with you. Why, he even told Tris to stay out of his sight if he didn't want a whipping."

Joel looked at Tris. "What over?"

"None of your business."

"Tris," Joel said, "you aren't a bad kid at heart, but you're sure heading for trouble. Was I you I'd be particular about the kind of company I kept. Run with polecats and you're bound to smell like 'em."

"Why, you damn weak-kneed son!" Tull yelled.

Joel swung down, knowing he had likely put this off too long as it was. Tull stepped back a pace, but only to keep himself clear. He wore a gun as usual, though Joel was unarmed. The big rancher ran his tongue over his lips. A man passing on the sidewalk caught the tension, halted and swung around.

Joel's voice was soft. "Did you stop me just to crowd trouble?"

"Only aimed to neighbor a little," Tull answered, his eyes watchful.

"Then let's neighbor."

Joel had looked indolent, but suddenly his fist flashed out. Tull went back under its impact on his jaw. He threw up a reflexive guard, letting out a grunt. He belted out with his other hand, but Joel knocked it aside and came in. The pair crashed together against the hitch-rail. There Tull lifted a knee and kicked Joel back.

Tris Quade stepped out of the way, excited and holding something within himself that seemed too much for him. Others had rushed up, and somebody called, "Good for you, Joel. It's high time."

Joel, off-balance, tried to slip away, but Tull's fist crashed stiffly against his jaw. He found himself going down. Tull came on in a bound, stiff-legged. He had his shoulders hunched so that he looked like a cat-backed bronco. The same suggestion was in his bared teeth. Joel brought up his feet, rocking on his back, and drove out at Tull's legs. The man came down on him in a free fall, and they rolled on the walk.

Joel got his legs around Tull's middle and, in the next roll, managed to keep on top. He lifted his weight and let it drop on the man's belly, knocking a ripping breath from Tull. He grabbed the wiry hair of the man's head and slammed the head hard against the planks. Groaning, Tull gained a grip on Joel's neck, digging his fingers deep into the sweating flesh, trying to cut off wind. Joel jerked free and scrambled to his feet.

He let Tull get fully up, then came in. He crossed a right and left, both connecting. Tull's back stiffened. He struck wildly, then fell forward against the hitch-rail. Joel swung him away from it, and this time

caught the man square on the chin. Tull's hands reached for his boot straps. He sat down where there was no seat and rolled over. He lay still.

JOEL pulled in a couple of heavy breaths. He saw no antagonism in the faces about him. They were surprised. Most would have picked the other man and, beyond that, Joel Strachey was an amiable man who stood for peace. Here and there a grin began to break, and a man said, "I've seen it coming a long while, but I never seen it coming out so nice. Joel, let me buy you a drink."

Joel thanked the man, shaking his head. Tris Quad was rubbing his palms on his hips, leaving sweat on his pants. Joel regarded him. "Tris, like I was saying before I was interrupted, I don't peg you as a bad kid. But what you'll be two years from now is another matter. Take my advice and steer clear of that thing on the walk there."

"I want no advice from you," Tris answered.

Joel would have gone back to Palmers' to ask Tom about that ruckus with Tris except for the fact that he would have to face Maddy again. He mounted, sore and stiffening from the fight, and headed for Lazy S. . . .

Routine caught him up quickly, out there, and he hated to keep track of the weeks in which no rain came to the parched range. Windy, now permanently transplanted to Lazy S, had evolved a theory about it: "The earth's poles has slipped, that's what. We're going to have summer all winter, and along about next August we'll catch a blizzard. Our own fault, too, the way human beings have took to interferin' with Nature. Like this talk about giving the wote to women."

"Don't that seem far-fetched, Windy?" Joel asked.

"It sure don't, when you think of it. What's happened to this country is the way them nesters plough it up and run their bob-wire everywhere. Old Nature'd rather wipe it out herself than see it ruint that away. So we get droughts and blizzards."

Water was an ever-increasing worry. With no new grass starting, the future looked dismal whatever developed. Joel had to tank some steers, as the rest of the basin was doing, and there was no time to think of collecting any of the feed store's bad accounts. Yet each day brought the first payment on the new mortgage closer and tightened his tension.

He had brought his bundle of charge slips out to the ranch, thinking he might be able to get around a little of evenings. But the basin's ranches lay at widely scattered distances. His scant intervals of spare time gave him no chance to visit them. But Tom was mending and anxious to get back in the saddle, and Joel figured his chance would come then.

There came the evening when Tom arrived, peaked but perky. The young puncher rode out on the range with Joel and Windy the next morning. Though the latter two had kept searching for sign that might expose Tom's attacker, Tom wanted to see for himself. The three rode a spiraling circle about the south tank that morning. Around noon Joel found a place where a horse had been left to stand for a period, within easy access of the rimrock above the tank. He trailed it a way. The animal had not been ridden toward Tull's T Rail but in the opposite direction. The elapsed time had let the infrequent wind foul the trail too much for it to be followed far.

TOM WAS too tired to ride that afternoon, but Windy went along with Joel, who told him of his discovery. They moved a little bunch of steers out of an area where Joel had found locoweed. Then Windy shook his head and said, "A man has got a kind of a thing in him that's like a jug of sourdough. It keeps swelling till it blows the cork."

"If you've got one about to blow," Joel said, "let her rip."

"I've got a notion," Windy said. "Maybe that busher didn't ride off in the wrong direction to deceive anybody like a man might figure. Maybe it was the way he really wanted to go. He'd fouled his foot tracks, and it was a accident when you found where he left his horse."

"If it was his horse," Joel said.

"I keep thinking it was. By that time the cuss would only be thinking of where he aimed to go and was in a sweat to get there. That make sense?"

"Not to me," Joel said.

"Don't make much to me, neither. Nothing over that way but Tris Quade's play ranch."

Joel frowned. Yet at supper that evening he said to Tom, "What was it you and the Quade kid tangled over?"

Tom grinned. "Nothing to speak of. Tris big-shots it plenty with that ranch his daddy gave him. Gravels a man working his daylights out for forty a month and having trouble collecting it."

"You threaten him?" Joel asked, remembering Tull had made a point of mentioning that.

"Not exactly. Told him once he couldn't even hold a punching job if he was on his own. He cussed me. Then I told him I'd knock his teeth loose as soon as he was dry behind the ears."

Joel let it drop. The next morning he rose and slipped quietly from the house to get away before Windy or Tom awakened. Saddling a horse, he rode out to the scarp break where they figured the bushwhacker might have waited. He thought, *Was I that fellow, I'd just have swung up now. I'd be sitting here in my saddle thinking of getting home fast. So I'd cut me a bee-line, just like Windy said. Now, where would it run to?*

He swung the horse, not hurrying it like the scared bushwhacker would have done but following that bee-line with care. It began to pay off, and here and there he picked up plainly detectable tracks that he had missed the day before. Once the bee-line carried him boldly across a mixture of shale and lava rock that would have defeated him otherwise. On the far side a little quartering back and forth disclosed the eroded trail. The horse had slowed after that, its rider easing, and now Joel saw that the horse swung its left front foot a little at a slower gait.

A half-hour later Joel sat on a rise staring down on the flat little valley in which nestled the headquarters of Big Seven. It was neat with the new buildings and corrals that Ash Quade had put up for his boy Tris. Joel stroked his jaw. It didn't make sense, but there it was. He had heard bad things about Tris, but certainly nothing that suggested a thing like this. It could have been one of Tris's riders, picking up easy killer money from Laz Tull. Just the same Tris had been scared to death the day of the fight with Tull in Broken Axe. Tris knew something.

There was no point in sitting there for somebody below to see and wonder at. Joel turned his horse back along the trail, trying to figure out what he would do next. The proper move would be to call in the sheriff, but a strong reluctance came to Joel when he considered it. He had only assumed that it was the bushwhacker's horse that had made this trail. It would have been trespass, all right, but there were other reasons why a Big Seven puncher or Tris himself could have ridden deep into the Lazy S and left his horse at a point close to the scene of the bushwhacking. . . .

Maddy was at the Lazy S ranch house when Joel reached there. He saw the livery horse at the yard hitch-bar. There was an open glint of bitterness in her eyes when he walked into the kitchen, and there was concern on the faces of her father and Tom Quin.

"Howdy," Joel said. "I was mistaken. You look better to me than a cow."

She tossed her head. "I thought you might want to know that your feed store burned to the ground last night. It was too far gone before it was noticed, and the bucket brigade couldn't do much. They saved a few sacks of feed. Axtel took it to his livery to keep for you."

Joel's eyes narrowed, and for a moment he thought that his knees would buckle. "Nothing around there would have set that place on fire. It was set by hand. And I've got a hunch who done it."

"Tull?" Windy asked. "Why would he?"

"Spite, maybe," Joel said. "I whipped him in front of half the town. Did you hear about that, Maddy? Me and the man tied into each other."

"I heard about it," Maddy said. "Too

bad you don't lay your punches where they'd do you some good."

"Then," Joel said, "it could have been somebody wanting to destroy my books so I'd have nothing to base any claims on trying to collect."

"Now you're getting bright," Maddy said. "Ash Quade as good as owns Lazy S."

"It happens I brought my accounts out here. Figured maybe I could get around evenings and see a few people."

Maddy closed her eyes and seemed almost to sway. "Then it isn't as bad as I thought. The main part of the business was on the books, anyhow."

Joel smiled at her. "Another place where I was smarter than you figured. A good way to insure a business is to get it on the books, then put the books away for safe keeping. In case of fire nothing burns up but the hole you were in. Girl, would you like to get aboard that livery mare and see what kind of competition you've got out here?"

"So somebody from Big Seven shot Tom," Maddy breathed. "Dad says Tom and Tris had trouble."

"Not shooting trouble. Now, don't you breath a word of this to anybody till I find out what's up. This sign might not mean a thing at all. Or it might mean a lot. If we don't go off half-cocked it might get us some place."

In her excitement Maddy had dropped her unfriendliness. "What do you think, Joel?"

"Had a notion right at the start that somebody might only have been trying to lay Tom up to get me out here so I couldn't work at my business. Burning the store ties in with it."

"Quade—and Tris!" Maddy said in a tight voice. "Of course! Why don't we get the sheriff, Joel, before Quade's had a chance to foreclose his little old mortgage?"

JOEL WAS thinking carefully as he rode out with Maddy. He took her up to the rim and along the bee-line to Big Seven. He didn't say anything, and when once more he looked down upon Quade headquarters he told her, "Remember this. I couldn't have Tom look at it for fear he'd ride into Big Seven a-gunning. And your daddy might let it leak out. But that sign will soon disappear, and I want you to remember how we followed it and how the horse swung its foot.

Joel regarded her solemnly. "It's a long jump between what a man suspects and can prove."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful, Joel, if we could hang Ash Quade and not have to worry any more?"

He grinned. "You're a fetchin little thing for a savage!" But she had turned and started her horse before he could reach for her.

Maddy rode back to town after the noon meal, still excited, but Joel knew she would hold her tongue. Tom still had to take his afternoon's rest, and old Windy had fallen asleep. Joel saddled a horse and headed for Big Seven.

He caught Tris there, but the punchers seemed to be away. He was not reassured by the tense, guarded manned in which the boy greeted him. Joel didn't dismount.

"Tris," he said, "saddle yourself a horse. There's something I want you to see."

Tris straightened. The face under the crisp, curly hair looked too old all at once. "I don't know what it would be, Strachey," he snapped.

"Saddle your horse, Tris." There was something flat, cold and insistent in Joel's voice.

Tris shrugged, turned and went back into the house. Joel didn't like the looks of it when the boy reappeared with his gun-belt buckled on. Joel still hadn't taken to going armed and wasn't now. Tris walked down to the day corral and roped a horse. It was a gentled mustang, a nice-looking sevina. Joel slouched in the saddle, an easy interest on his face though the pulse in his ears was thumping.

"That's a mighty nice horse," he said. "One of your private string?"

Tris nodded absently, no friendliness in him. Joel noticed that his fingers trembled as he bridled and saddled the horse, but without that Joel had what he wanted. Tris's nod meant that nobody else ever used the mustang, and Joel had noted, as Tris led it out, that it threw its left front foot. Tris mounted, and they rode out.

FINALLY they gained the knoll viewpoint that Joel had twice visited that day. Guarded study showed him the growing disquiet in Tris. The boy couldn't keep his gaze off the copious tracks left by the other horses that had ridden the same trail recently, following it inexorably, the riders deducing the unalterable truth. They crossed the rock field that had been used in the hope of confounding trackers. When Joel unerringly picked up the trail on the far side, Tris pulled down.

"What is this?" his harsh voice demanded.

Joel sighed. "I reckon you know, boy. We're riding the trail the man who shot Tom Quin rode in getting away. We'll come to where he left his horse, which you notice threw a foot a little. From that point it's another bee-line to the place where the coyote squeezed trigger. What's the matter, Tris? You look plumb sick."

Tris swung his horse in sudden arrogance, and they rode on. By the time they reached the point where the bushwhacker's horse had been left, Joel had no doubts about it. They pulled down, and Joel looked at Tris carefully.

"Now," he said, "you can simply dare the law to prove this has any meaning. You can claim one of your punchers must have taken your private horse. But it will come out at the same place in the end. You shot Tom or know who did. Who was it?"

There was a moment in which the silence seemed a weight on Joel's eardrums. Tris crossed his hands on the saddle horn, and his glance cut past his horse's neck to rivet on the ground. Heat hung about them, still and scented, and in the infinite haze of the sky hung a deep repose. There was the chance that the boy would pull his gun, but Joel didn't think he would. From what he had seen, Tris Quade loathed the knowledge that was in him, the memory of what had happened, and this moment would tell whether he was fundamentally bad or decent.

Tris looked up at him. "Have you sent for the sheriff?"

"Not yet. I figured you had a right to speak your piece."

After a long moment Tris said, "I can't figure you out, Strachey. You don't act the way most men do. I've been pretty ornery with you, and you don't owe me anything. A man would think you'd jump at the chance to get me into hot water."

"The only hot water I'd like to see you in is what it would take to scrub you clean. I've had a notion Laz Tull got his hooks into you somehow. I figure your dad has something to do with this thing. It happens they're a lot older than you and more accountable."

There was another silence, a sigh, and Tris said, "I'm not trying to beg off, but you're right. They both had plenty to do with it. There's no use in my stalling, like you say. You're right. I shot Tom Quin.

Now let's go and see the sheriff. I want to get it off my mind. And I'd rather face the law than my dad."

"Because you bungled it?" Joel asked softly.

Tris flung him a harsh glance. "He don't know anything about it, and that's the whole point."

Joel swallowed. "You'd better cut the deck a little deeper, kid."

"First off, get this straight. I wasn't trying to kill Tom but only to wing him. The idea was to lay him up so you'd have to take over at Lazy S and couldn't collect your bills."

"If your dad isn't in it, what good would that do anybody?"

Tris shrugged. "I dunno. But I was told to put Quin out of business or else. It started when I took to gambling in that deadfall Purcell runs over in Milky River. I've been riding over there for some fun, figuring my dad wouldn't find out about it. Tull hangs around over there and sort of took up with me, soft-soaping me I see now and making me feel pretty tough. He likewise collected a batch of my IOUs. He put the heat on me for the money, which he knew I didn't have, then threatened to take 'em to Ash Quade."

"Blackmail, eh? That's how he induced you to shoot Tom."

"That's how. He promised to give me the chits if I'd do it. I only tried to get Tom through the shoulder, but he happened to turn, and it got him a lot worse than I wanted. You don't know how scared I've been that he'd die and it'd be murder. Tull went back on his promise, claiming I hadn't carried out the bargain unless Tom did die. That was just a stall. Now he claims he's got two punchers who'll swear they seen me close to the place where Tom was shot and at the same time. He threatened to tell how Tom jumped me that time, and how scared I've been of him ever since then."

"A new caper?" Joel asked.

Tris nodded. "Now he's going to blackmail Dad with that. So everything I do only gets me in deeper, and that's why I'm willing to talk."

HIS STORY impressed Joel. Tris seemed relieved, and there was no whining in him. He could remember Tris from boyhood and, with it brought to mind now, he could recall many times when he had felt sorry for him. Ash Quade was as proud as he was coldly efficient. Tris had been kept away from the town kids. Ash had more than steered; he had flogged his son along the lines he wanted him to travel. He had reaped a harvest of wild rebellion that even yet Tris wanted to keep from his father. Joel understood that fear.

He had a moment in which he hadn't pursued his suspicion. A shooting such as Tris had undertaken, whatever his motive, couldn't be dismissed. Tom had hung for days between life and death, and his recovery was strictly to the credit of his own stamina. Tris had to pay the price of his folly, and Joel didn't relish being the one to have brought it about.

He said, "It looks like you already know that a man can't run away from himself. If you'll promise not to try to leave the country, I'll keep this under my hat for a spell. To my mind you're your daddy's spoiled job and Laz Tull's tool. Seems to me you've got a fair shake coming and you won't get it if I take you to town today."

"I'll stick around," Tris said. "But Tull will go to my dad. He was fixing all along to take a bite out of him."

"It would serve Ash Quade right," Joel said. "But if Tull hasn't seen him yet he's probably in no hurry. There's some way I cut into it, and I'd say Tull still hasn't played out his string. Now, you get home and keep your nose clean for a change. Don't think I aim to let you off. It was a bad thing you pulled, and you've got the bill to pay."

"I know," Tris said. "And thanks. You've still got me puzzled."

Joel rode through a warm morning to Broken Axe and went at once to the Palmer house. A sweeping glance from the main street corner showed him the emptiness of the lot where his building had stood. The gray ashes and crosshatch of charred timbers struck in him his first real awareness of the loss. He was out of business,

like it or not, and his only chance now of meeting the mortgage payment was through collecting some of his bad bills.

Maddy had given her boarders their breakfast and was at work with her dusting. She had a cloth drawn about her head and a smudge on her cheek, and her quick confusion at his catching her that way stirred something in Joel's heart. They had parted on reasonably friendly terms at the ranch, and though embarrassed now she still seemed open to a friendly approach.

He gave it to her by lifting her off her feet and kissing her. But the differences between them were still there, he found, for her response was only perfunctory. He put her down, wanting nothing from a woman that was not freely given.

"You're in early," Maddy said cautiously.

"A trifle. I reckon it's time I got back to business."

"You mean you're going after your money finally?"

He gave her a long study. "That word finally wasn't necessary. I've seen every one of those people half a dozen times. There isn't much money comes into this basin except at beef roundup."

"People find the money to do what they really want," Maddy breathed. "You don't know what they've got in the bank or cached away some place. There're always little deals going on with money changing hands. Your trouble is that you accept it when somebody tells you he's broke."

"How could I tell he isn't?" Joel asked sharply.

"You could threaten him the way the wholesalers threaten you. It bestirred you to raise some money, didn't it?"

"Thunderation!" Joel said. He walked out, with them right back where they had been.

CHARGE slips were stuffed in his saddlebags, making all that remained of his feed business traveling with him. He had a dozen cowmen in mind to see that day, men he suspected could cough up a little if they really wanted to do it.

He saw his men and found that word of his loss in the fire had got around. Some of them expressed concern and voluntarily offered to see if they couldn't do something more about their bills than they had figured. At Ferd Davis's, Joel was surprised with a small check. Gid Oxford reached into his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar gold piece. At the Bobtail spread in the foothills, Cece Nearing astonished Joel by giving him a check in full. "Heard about your hard luck, Joel. Doggone, that's a thing to happen to man as good-hearted as you. When I heard about the fire I told the missus we were going to square up with you even if it did run us mighty short. Darned if she didn't agree with me."

It was evening by then, and Joel turned across the hills for Lazy S with a fair start on the amount he needed to satisfy Ash Quade in another few weeks. He came upon Laz Tull and two T Rail punchers without warning. The trio came out of a canyon ahead of him and pulled down their horses in quick interest.

Uneasiness climbed in Joel. He hadn't seen Tull since the day he had whipped him. He would be a poor match against three of them. They were a long way from home range, and this puzzled Joel. Nothing but malpais lay in the direction they came from, and there was nothing in there but wild emptiness.

The three waited for Joel to come up, then fell in beside him. Tull seemed neither friendly nor unfriendly, and his voice was civil when he said, "You're a long ways from home, Strachey."

"So I am," Joel said. "And so are you boys."

"We've been wolfing," Tully said readily. "Been losing calves. Curly has been spying on a pair of lobos and located the den back in the malpaise."

"Did you get them?"

"No."

Joel thought the explanation was too readily offered, and he returned no excuse for his own presence in this isolated region. Remembering Tris Quade, Joel had less liking than ever for their company, yet could only ride along. Then, as abruptly as they had appeared, they turned off again, this time riding down country. Joel heaved

a sigh of relief and fell to wondering what had really taken them in there. . . .

He put in three days riding from spread to spread with his bagful of accounts. Not a day turned out like that first one, where word of the fire had drifted. But Joel refused to use the fire to evoke sympathy on his behalf. He got a little dab from Sam Jackson but the others stalled as usual, claiming honest intentions and a heartful of regret but no cash with which to do anything useful.

Joel's worry was high when he rode into Broken Axe to leave what money he had taken in with Maddy.

She had a sick look on her face when she saw how little he had collected. Finally she said, "You're not going to meet it, are you?"

"Doesn't look like it," he admitted.

"What will you do?"

"Have to ask Quade for an extension."

"He won't give it to you!" Maddy said fiercely. "He'll foreclose! He'll show you no mercy! Joel, why don't you go over there and tell him what we know and dare him to foreclose on you!"

Joel's cheeks drained. "If anybody blackmails Ash Quade, Maddy, it won't be me and you."

"But he was involved in a murder attempt!"

"He wasn't in on that, Maddy," Joel said, and he sighed. He would have to tell her of his talk with Tris. "I've already talked to the kid. Sit down, and I'll tell you about it." He did so, pointing out the things both of them remembered from Tris's past. In conclusion he said, "Now, Quade would probably tear up that mortgage to keep us quiet about that. Would you want him to?"

After a long moment Maddy said in a scarcely audible voice, "No. I guess not."

IT GOT Joel, coming at a moment when she saw everything slipping away from them. They were coming close to each other again, and he had to go on with it. Gruffly he said, "In your heart you don't want me to go to law against my neighbors the way Quade would, either, do you?"

Her gaze came up to meet his. "I guess I've been of two minds about it, Joel. But I'm not as strong as you are. I want to fight to defend what's mine, even if I have to be cruel. But there's one thing I won't back down on. People take advantage of your good nature, and you've got to learn to see it."

Joel shook his head. "I don't figure a man ever hurts himself by doing what's decent and understanding and helpful. I was raised to believe that, Maddy, and I couldn't get it out of my system if I wanted to. And I'd rather keep on that way even if it costs something to do it."

He rose, and she came quickly to her feet.

She said, "I love you, Joel, and I want to marry you—so bad I can't stand to see the chances swept clean away. But I've learned this since the trouble has been on us. I'll still want to marry you even if you have to start riding for wages."

He pulled her into his arms, and for the first time her body came full and warm against him. Her lips stirred under his for the first time in their relationship, and he knew that with this coming in the depths of her despair it was her full and final surrender to him. He felt humble and grateful and proud of her for rising above her fears and resentments.

Then somebody's boots hit the porch, and knuckles thumped heavily on the door.

With a dry smile Maddy pulled away and, a moment later, called from the hallway: "Joel, it's Tris Quade. He wants to see you."

Tris gripped his hat in both hands as he watched Joel come up. He was pale, but his features were set, his gaze steady. When Joel glanced cautiously at Maddy, Tris said, "Let her stay. I was just over to the sheriff's office, but he's out of town somewhere. What I had to say won't keep. Tull's on the move, and I know now what the big caper is. His outfit is running cattle tonight. He tried to force me to help him."

"Whose cattle?" Joel thundered.

"Yours and Wing K's and the Double Six's. Outfits that join onto Tull's."

"Why in thunderation would anybody

want to rustle droughted cattle?"

"Tull just wants to get rid of them," Tris answered. "He means to run them herds into the malpais to die in there. He wants to make sure you three outfits go broke. He wants your graze, and that's what he's been after from the start. He never wanted money out of Dad. He got his hooks in me to force my father to string along and foreclose the mortgages he holds on you three."

Joel eyed Tris. "Do you realize that you're burning your bridge, Tris? Tull will drag you into it if he's caught."

"Now's the only time he can be caught," Tris said, and his voice carried decision.

Joel turned to Maddy. "Girl, you go into every saloon in town if you need to. If you see any punchers from Wing K or Double Six tell them to ride for their spreads. Tris, do you want to throw in with me?"

"I reckon," Tris said.

TRIS and Joel rode out of town at a hard pound while Maddy watched. Old Windy would follow. Tris exonerated the punchers riding for him, who knew nothing of what had been going on. He wasn't effusive, but there was a full if quiet acknowledgment of his own guilt and the need to pay his debt. Tonight's move had come from a desire to prevent his missteps from running on into disaster for others.

He had already sent his punchers off to warn the other two ranches concerned in the night's cattle raid. Laz Tull was breaking his big crew into three groups, each to make a clean sweep of a designated outfit and run the stuff into the malpais.

"It was the fact that I worked in the bank up to a year ago that got him started," Tris said. "He pried a lot of information out of me about everybody's private business, how deep they were in debt and how well they were keeping up with it. That man won't stop at anything. He set fire to your feed store, and this raid is to make sure you go under."

"I had that figured out," Joel said. "We'll let him go so far he can't wiggle out of a rustling charge, anyhow."

They reached Lazy S in the fullness of night, with a new moon beginning to show. Joel got his hand and saddle gun and filled his pockets with shells. Tom and old Windy had not yet been warned by Tris's men. Joel told them everything except Tris's

shooting of Tom, concluding, "The word's around, and it's up to the different spreads to look out for themselves. I seen Tull and a couple of his riders coming out of the malpais, and that's where they'll head. We'll let them take our herd beyond our line so it can't be called anything but rustling. Then we'll open the ball and see what comes of it. Windy, I wish you'd stay here and look after things."

Windy gave him a broad grin. "The hell you say!" He had been checking his old Peacemaker.

Before they swung onto fresh mounts, Joel gave his final instructions: "Tom, you take Windy and wait on the far side of the coulee. Me and Tris will keep to this side. Tull's men will have to shove the critters through there. We'll let 'em pass, then come together and follow far enough behind that they won't get suspicious. When I give the word we'll jump 'em. It'll be a fight for our lives, so don't fool around any."

"Don't worry," Tom said. "Somebody in that outfit put a chunk of lead in me."

Joel saw Tris straighten in the saddle, but Tom was staring off into the night. Old Windy was too excited to take notice. They mounted and rode out a distance before they separated silently, turned grim and thoughtful. The night was serene, the moon not bright but fair enough to let them see well. Scattered stars added their glow, so that the shadowed beauties of the range stood out in striking detail.

Knowing his own land, Joel led the way with Tris following, working up the plateau and coming in behind the benchland. Presently he swung down and motioned to Tris to leave his horse also. Thereafter they crossed the bench on foot and on its lip dropped flat to wait, perhaps for hours or, if they were misguessing, to wait in futility.

The coulee was flat-bottomed and wide, running to a sharp rim-rise at a great distance. But this was the only convenient way a herd could be moved out toward the malpais. Tull's outfit wouldn't care how much sign it left, for the idea was to lend the raid the look of rustlers' work. The only necessity was to drive the cattle beyond recovery before death from thirst and starvation had occurred in the far-flung bad lands. Tull's hold on Ash Quade had been designed to do the rest for him.

It seemed to Joel that hours passed in which nothing broke the even tenor of the soft, warm night. Then at last he grew aware of a rumble in the hard earth. He spoke softly, "There's one thing, Tris. In case you're going into this with an idea of getting yourself killed, get it out of your head. You're ashamed and miserable and think nothing can make life worth living again. But the way I figure, a man don't get away from himself even when he dies."

"I've messed things plenty," Tris said.

Joel dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Boy, there's two things in a man that account for all he is and does. There's his ornery head, full of wild and misguided notions. Then there's something else. Don't ask me what. But it can lift a man above himself sometimes. It lifted you when you 'fessed up to me and again when you come to town tonight knowing you were banging a steel door on yourself. You let that thing handle this from here on."

He could hear it now, the low but typical rumble of massed hoofs. Far down the coulee he saw the barely discernible shapes of the moving herd, his cattle. Yet he felt less anger at T Rail's brazen treachery in this raid upon its neighbors than in Tull's cynical misuse of this callow boy. He had the hope that Tull would be with this particular party.

LITTLE by little the herd drew near. It came abreast, the scuffed earth lifting dust above the cattle's bobbing backs. A pair of riders clung to either flank and two more dragged behind, and outriding on either side were two more. That made six to be met, in stopping the raid, by four men. Joel found himself holding his breath. The movement was too far out for the attack to be opened here, even if he had figured that wise.

When at last the mass was lost in distance, Joel rose silently. Tris came quickly to his feet. Joel said nothing more to him, and they crossed the bench. Dropping down, they reached their horses and mounted. They had to swing back a distance to get into the coulee, and by that time it was safe to strike out boldly to make contact with Tom and Windy.

They met the others wordlessly and turned after the driven herd. Joel kept the gap wide for a while, their mounts scuffing with little sound along the churned-up path of the steers. Dust hung in the air, sharp and acrid, and the rumble of hoofs made a constant protection against stray noise betraying them. The coulee bent and began to narrow. Presently they were well away from Lazy S range, and Joel felt the mounting tension in the men riding with him. It was high in himself. They were out-numbered, and T Rail would fight viciously to save itself. . . .

There was no chance to surprise more than the drag riders, and Joel said, "Let's get at the chore, boys. Try and get the two behind first. That might give us a fair shake against the rest." He lifted his horse

to a gallop, his carbine in his hand. His mount was longer-legged than the others, and he built his plans on this. He was carried rapidly ahead, the whole party now moving at a heedless, thundering clatter.

The dust grew thicker about him, the herd rumble louder. Far ahead he saw a horse that had been halted and swung around while its rider investigated the disturbance. Joel discarded carbine, drew a holster gun and pulled the trigger. The man up there stayed glued to the saddle, but the horse bolted. Then the rider toppled out.

Joel spurred his horse, hearing his companions give out with ripping shouts. He swung toward the other drag rider, went past his position and wheeled in behind the cattle. He wanted to take a man alive, and this was his best prospect. He flattened himself along his horse's neck. A moment later a gun flashed in the dust to his left. Joel drove straight toward the flash, kicking his feet loose from the stirrups. A T Rail horse loomed ahead of him, and its rider fired wildly.

Joel dropped the gun and drove against the horse, letting the impact hurl him from the saddle and against the T Rail rider. They hit the ground in a crashing heap. Joel grabbed the gun in the other's hand and gave it a quick, twisting yank that tore it free. The man was stunned, but Joel rapped him hard across the head with the pistol to insure that his prize would stay here.

He shoved up, hearing the crackle of gunfire on ahead. His horse had pounded away. He retrieved the carbine and ran into the dust, following the herd and the mounting gunfight. It swirled ahead of him, and he knew the remaining T Rail punchers had fallen back to meet the attack. He heard a shout without being able to identify the voice. A riderless horse, looming out of the dust, nearly ran him down and was away before he could catch it. He went on, still running, the crackling fight now all about him.

He saw a streaking figure in the dust but dared not fire for lack of identification. Then he stumbled over something soft and warm, a body. He dropped to a knee. It was another T Rail man, with no life left in him. Then Joel grew aware that the fight was running away from him. Cursing his helplessness, he lunged on. He saw a riderless horse standing off to his right, halted and staring after the furor. But the action had spooked it, and it wheeled and cut away when it sighted Joel.

He came upon another body, a sinking feeling hitting him at recognition of Tris Quade. *So it worked out your way,* he thought and went on. Then, with the abruptness of its beginning, the gunfire stopped. He heard Tom call out through the dust, "Joel, where the devil are you?" He answered, and in a moment Tom's horse clattered up.

"Catch me something to ride," Joel shouted.

Tom swung off, and it seemed a long while before he came back leading a horse. Just as Joel lifted himself to the saddle, a far-off shot rang out.

"Where's Windy?" Joel asked.

"Lost track of him. One or two run for it, but we've got what we wanted. Let Tull try to explain all this."

JOEL sent his horse ahead, for the shooting up there meant that two enemies had come close together. He knew old Windy would be capable of taking out after the fleeing raiders alone. He kept pounding.

He rode for a considerable distance before he caught sight of three horses pounding ahead of him, close behind the running herd. Gunfire winked again, the two in the lead flinging shots at the pursuer. Joel dug spurs, recognizing Windy as he passed him, hearing the heavy bark of the old Peacemaker. A man ahead quit the saddle abruptly. The other fired back, the slug coming close. Joel lifted the carbine and let go, but a sudden swerve of his horse on the uneven ground sent his shot wild.

Joel pulled up. took the time to steady his aim, and squeezed trigger. He saw the rider ahead lurch and then spill. Now two riderless horses were pounding it there ahead.

Joel swung down. A cold, mirthless grin spread on his face. Laz Tull lay at his feet. Joel stooped, struck a match, and saw that the man had been drilled through the back of the head.

Windy pulled down his horse and said, "Well, I'll be blamed!"

"What's so strange about it?" Joel asked. "I'm the one the cuss seemed to be concentrating on mostly."

"I don't mean him," Windy said. "Knowed it was Tull, and that's why I chased him. I mean them clouds up there. Look!"

Joel looked and saw the fleecy darkness that was running in across the moon. . . .

The first fat drops of rain came as they got Tris Quade to the Lazy S ranch house. By that time Joel was hardly interested, for there was still a pulse in Tris. Discovering this, the others had let the herd run on, knowing it would soon grind to a halt without anyone harrying it.

Tom headed for town and the doctor through a heavy downpour. While Joel and Windy did what they could for Tris, the sheriff and a large party of basin ranchers rode up. It was all over but the shouting, the officer reported, the other two raids having been broken up also.

Regret filled Joel as he watched the party ride on. The sheriff had said it was all over, but it wasn't for Tris.

Tom got back with the doctor around ten o'clock that morning, and Maddy and Ash Quade rode with them. Quade's face was grave, white—the banker wiped off and something of the father left showing.

It seemed a long while before Doc Slater came out to the porch. He said, "Well, it's another bad one. But the boy is young. Usually the sprouts come through by sheer will, the chance to live meaning so much to them." He called to Quade, who was moving aimlessly about the ranchyard. "You can go in, Ash. He's conscious."

When Quade came out he stood for a moment in the kitchen doorway. His glance touched Joel's, and there was a queer, baffled light in the grey eyes. Then he looked at Tom Quin.

"Tris just told me all about it," he said. "And he didn't need to. Tull's gone for good, and he'd never've approached me. Tom, Tris says you don't know he was the one who shot you."

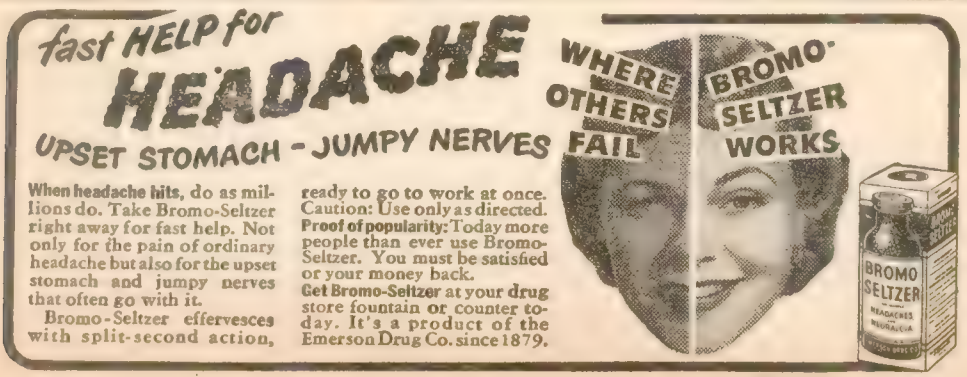
Tom's jaw slacked. "Tris shot me? Why on earth would he?"

"Because," Quade said, "he was afraid of his father."

"I'll be blamed!" Tom pulled out his tobacco and began to make himself a cigarette. "Wouldn't mind hearing howcome, Mr. Quade. It's the first time I was ever gunned for that."

QUADE told him, sparing none of the details, unsparing of himself. He concluded, "Tris wants to see the sheriff. I'll go back to town and—and send him out as soon as I can get in touch with him."

Tom struck a match, lighted his cigarette and looked thoughtful. "Now, hold on! I seen Tris get it. A jigger was blazing away at him, and the kid drove right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into it. The two of them went out of the saddle together. Now, it was me Tris shot. If anybody's got a right to say what's to be done with him, I have, ain't I?"

Quade nodded numbly.

"Then forget it," Tom said. "It never happened."

Maddy looked up at Joel. "Could I have done that?" she asked him. "It was hard enough for me to forgive Tris for being such a snip."

"Tom's all man," Joel said.

Her eyes were warmly appraising. "You are, too, Joel Strachey. I don't deserve you."

"Now, look here!" Joel began. They were still on the porch, and a horse and rider turned into the ranchyard. Joel recognized Millard Haig, a man who still owed him for feed bought three years back.

Haig tipped a nod, looking self-conscious. He said, "Joel, word just got out our way that your store burned up. That's a pure shame. Me, I figured things over, and I reckon I can give you a couple hundred on what I been owing you. Sure ashamed of myself letting it run so long." He held out a check and stumbled off the porch before Joel could recover enough to thank him.

It nearly had Joel beat when the same thing happened an hour later. It was getting on to dusk, and he saw the obese figure of Ollie Farman waddle out of a buckboard. Like Haig, Farman had trouble getting his tongue untwisted.

"Why didn't you tell a man about the fire?" he demanded finally. "With me owing you for hay I bought a year back. Me, I've been sitting on a little nest egg I figured I had to have in case of emergency. Hell, you got the emergency. Here it is!" The check he offered would pay the bill in full, and it made Joel blink. Farman swung off, then turned to say, "Seen Rupe Canby today. He told me to tell you he'll be in in a couple days and settle with you."

Joel had to take the check in for Maddy to see. Her eyes shone. "I know what did it, Joel. You've always been so generous they figured you could afford it. And when they found out you can need help as bad as they can, they dug a little deeper."

Joel shook his head. "It was the rain. They stopped worrying and decided they could spare a little."

"Modest," Maddy said, and she laughed.

They walked down the lane to the ranch gate. The sky was clear again, but the rain had brought freshness to the air, wiping out the parched dryness of the earth. Something in the atmosphere declared that the drought was ended, for already the water supply had been replenished and new grass would soon start. Nobody had ever heard of four bad years hand running. Joel felt pretty good.

"Will you rebuild the store and start up again, Joel?" Maddy asked.

"You willing?"

"Of course, if that's what you want."

With that he knew he had all he wanted already, a full fusion with the girl he loved.

"Then," Joel said, "let's go ranching."

"But what will happen to Tom?"

He smiled. "Why, Tom's hired out to Ash Quade. Tris wants somebody with the right savvy to teach him the cattle business. And Tom's the one he wanted."

"Well, what do you know?" Maddy breathed. "Come on. Let's go in to town and give my boarders notice."

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# Schoolmarms and Christmas

*By S. OMAR BARKER*

DRIVING down our snowbanked canyon road on a frosty afternoon several Decembers ago, outward bound from our mountain hide-out to spend Christmas with Elsa's folks, we paused a moment in passing the one room adobe schoolhouse at Tecoloteños to listen to some mighty larrupin' Christmas music. To wit:

***Real old-time Western Christmases brought to life***

the piping but tuneful voices of twenty-odd Spanish-American *escueleros* inside, without benefit of piano or other accompani-

ment, caroling out with earnest vim and vigor:

***"Santa Closs ees comeen' to town-n-n-!"***

From the muddy cars, wagons and saddle horses hitched outside, we knew what was going on. The local schoolmarm was putting the kids through their long practiced Christmas program for the admiring eyes and ears of proud parents, cousins and neighbors from several miles around, just as rural Western school teachers have been doing ever since the rabbits got short tails. We also knew that the schoolmarm was a pretty Spanish girl from town, and that two or three of the saddle horses hitched outside belonged to local black-haired young vaqueros who might be as much interested in catching a smile from the brown-eyed *maestra* as in listening to schoolkid songs and recitations. That sort of thing, too, has been going on for a long time—both in English and Spanish.

We usually contribute some kind of a treat for the Tecoloteños school's "Crees-mas," and we always get invited to attend the program. Usually both teacher and pupils are Spanish-American, but the program is presented in English, though sometimes in English with an accent as comic as it is cute.

At one such program, I remember, three seven-year-old *muchachitos* came marching out on the improvised platform with huge bath towel turbans on their little heads, trailing robes of oriental splendor (fashioned from old cotton blankets) and stood rolling their big, black, Charles-Boyer eyes and nudging each other for a full minute before anything happened. Then suddenly one of them rattled off in one pauseless breath: "We-ARE-the-t'ree-WICE-men-EES-that-a-estar-I-see shinEENG een-THE-sky?"

Shading his eyes with a pudgy brown hand, like an old plains scout looking for Indians, the second little Wise Man snuffled nonchalantly and beat Wise Man No. 1 all to the dickens for speed with: "Yes-EET-ees-THE-star-of-Bethlehem!"

"Let-US-follow-EET!" chimed in Wise Man No. 3.

Belatedly somebody poked a gold tinsel star on the end of a broomstick out over the top of a curtain and started moving it across the stage. But as the three Wise Men started solemnly to follow it, a brief but unscheduled interruption occurred. From the front row of the audience, a sweet-faced old woman in a black shawl arose, stepped to the stage, grabbed Wise Man No. 2 and gave his little brown nose a much needed wiping with a handkerchief.

*"Es mejor! Es mejor!"* (That's better! That's better!") She smiled cheerfully as she resumed her seat and the march to Bethlehem solemnly continued.

***"A new rig to take her ridin' in"***

A NIECE of mine once taught such a one-room school where the "scholars" as old-timers called them, came from both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking homes. For her Christmas program she had them all sing *Holy Night* and *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!* first in English and then in Spanish. You could see pride glistening in the sun-wrinkled eyes of grandfathers and grandmothers who couldn't understand a word of it as they listened to their little brown *niños* singing in perfectly good English right along with the *Anglo* children. But it was when they heard

the *Anglo* kids join in caroling the same songs in Spanish that they really applauded.

Nowadays many of the old one-room *escuelas* are being abandoned for modern consolidated schools to which some children are daily hauled twenty miles or more and back in buses. Doubtless there will always be fine Christmas programs in the bigger new schools, too, but never can whole groups of teachers be quite the Christmas inspiration that single lone schoolmarms of one-room schools once were 'most all over the cow country West.

I say "single schoolmarms" advisedly, because in the old bronc and buckboard days many a cowboy wintered on the ranch instead of drifting south with the sunshine solely because of the smiles of some "single" newcomer schoolmarm.

"Whenever I was on the schoolboard in them days," an old-timer once told me, "I always favored hirin' the best-lookin', young, unmarried schoolmarms from the East that we could get. I always figgered that the more we could fix it for cowboys to marry gals with enough sense and education to teach school, the better it was for the country.

"Not only that, but I owned a half interest in an outfit that sold buggies and buckboards, and ever' time we fetched in a new schoolmarm, two or three lovesick cowboys was purt' near sure to buy them a new rig to take her ridin' in!

"Speakin' of schoolmarms and Christmas," continued the old-timer, "did I ever tell you about me and my Lucy? She was a schoolmarm. Come all the way out from Indiany. Purtiest head of dark red hair you ever seen on a heifer! 'Course I started courtin' her right from the start. But so did some other cowpokes better lookin' and not as bashful as I was.

"Along in December the schoolmarm announced she was fixin' to have the scholars put on a program at the schoolhouse Christmas Eve, and everybody was invited. It also become known that she was havin' all the kids write letters to Santa Claus, telling him what they wanted most for Christmas. She told them that if they would be reasonable and not ask for too much, she would sure do her best to get Santa Claus to come through with it.

"That gave me an idea. I set down and wrote a little letter to ol' Santy myownself. I slipped it under the schoolhouse door one evening after the teacher left.

"Well, she set the program for early in the evening so the littler kids could stay 'wake, and so there'd be plenty of time left for the dance that some of us cowpokes had cooked up for afterwards. I don't recollect howcome me to get there a little late—honin' the nicks out of my ol' Wade & Butcher razor, maybe—but when I come in, a cute little yaller-haired gal scholar was up there on the platform readin' those letters to Santy Claus, and when she come to mine, she read it just like I'd wrote it, without ever battin' an eye:

"'Dear Santa Claus: All I want for Christmas is a purty little red-headed schoolmarm.' And of course I'd been fool enough to sign my name to it, and when the little gal read it right out before God and ever'body, it like to busted up the meetin'. I never seen any gal blush as hard—nor as purty—as that schoolmarm did. I hadn't aimed to throw my loop quite so public, but as long as I had, I figgered I'd just as well foller it up.

"So the first time I got a chance to dance with her after the kid's program was over, I come right out and laid it on the taw line how I felt about her. That turned out to be her last term of schoolteachin'. We was married right after school let out in the spring—with ol' Tom Ellers, where she boarded, dressed up like Santa Claus to give the bride away!"

Of course not every cowpoke who wanted a schoolmarm for Christmas was that lucky, but whether they were or not, a lot of old-timers will tell you that nobody ever did more to make Christmas merry in the cow country than those hard-working schoolmarms. Their Christmas kid-programs could bring all kinds of folks together, regardless of feuds and disagreements, in a spirit of Christmas neighborliness and good will out here in an essentially lonely land where the cattle were many but the people few.

# END OF

*Wade crouched, the knife making little circles*

SHEILA NEELY paused in the act of setting the filled dishes down on the counter. She'd caught just a glimpse of the big man as he'd passed the window of her restaurant, and she felt the increased beat of her heart.

Wade Samson glanced at her, his eyes sharpening. He twisted on his stool, looked out of the window, and saw no one. He turned back, and Sheila set the dishes down with determined little thumps, spilling some of the food.

"Was that Haynes?" he asked in a flat voice.

"No," she snapped. "Eat your supper before it's cold."

Dana Haynes wasn't coming in here and, she thought with asperity, she didn't care. He probably wouldn't have enough money to pay for his meal anyway. She was tired of receiving smiles as payment for the meals she worked so hard to prepare.

She wouldn't look up as the door opened. She damned the traitorous color in her face as she mopped the counter with brisk efficiency.

"Sheila!" Dana Haynes said her name with a soft insistence that tugged at her

# SEARCH

**By Giles A. Lutz**

*IT WAS GAY in the big cities and dour in Portuguese Flat, but after all a girl has to stay where her heart tells her is home*

heart. Unwillingly, she raised her eyes.

He stood in the center of the room, his grin showing strong, white teeth. His eyes were blue, and they always looked as though they were dancing with some inner delight. He had a great shock of tawny hair and huge, powerful hands. His shoulders were broad, stretching his shirt to its limit, and through a tear in the sleeve she saw the rippling muscle of his upper arm.

She looked at the tanned, firm flesh, and unaccountably a little tremor raced through her. She'd heard miners say that no two men could do the work Dana did, and the memory of those words angered her. What good was all that hard work doing him?

His grin broadened, and her hand rose, straightening the luxuriant mass of her hair. He said, "I wasn't coming in, but Johnny put up an awful fuss. He wanted to see the pretty lady again."

She supposed it was some weakness of hers that she could never stay angry at him. She smiled as she looked at the tousle-headed little boy holding onto Dana's hand. Johnny was six, and he looked like his father. He had the same blue eyes, the same tawny hair. He'd lost his mother and Dana his wife over a year ago on the sea voyage to San Francisco. Sheila always felt a stab of wistfulness whenever she looked at Johnny. His mother must've been very lovely.

She jumped at the smacking sound of Wade's palm upon the counter. He said sharply, "Sheila, my glass is empty." His eyes smoldered as he watched her refill it. He had deep-set eyes with dark fires burning in them. He wasn't as tall as Dana, but he was built on sturdier lines. He was a serious man, rarely smiling and, Sheila thought, a steady man. There was no frivolity about him.

Wade asked sullenly, "Anything happen out to the diggings in the last couple of days?"

"No," Dana said slowly. "We're still cutting down to bedrock. It's only a matter of time until we reach the gold." He studied Wade and said with a soft, sardonic tinge, "The boys are worried about you being sick. They're wondering when you're coming back."

WADE'S face went a darker shade. "I'm not coming back," he said furiously. "I've worked all summer for nothing. You and your crazy idea have bankrupted the camp. One of these days those miners will be asking you for an accounting."

Dana said curtly, "I didn't force anyone into this. I told you my idea. You all wanted a part of it. When anyone asks for that accounting, I'll be there."

They locked eyes, and Wade looked away first. He slid off the stool, stomped past Dana and headed for the door.

Sheila called, "Wade, your supper..."

He stopped at the door, the anger holding on his face. "I'm not hungry," he snapped. "Sheila, remember our talk last night!"

As the door slammed she thought wearily, he didn't pay for his supper. She pushed the disloyal thought aside. In his anger he must've forgotten it.

As she started to remove the dishes, she saw Johnny eagerly eyeing the food. She said, "Are you hungry, Johnny?" She saw his quick, eager nod and said, "Eat it." She looked at Dana. "Wade paid for it."

Dana lifted Johnny onto the stool and said cheerfully, "Have at it, son."

She thought, he has no shame. Even with the dislike between them, he'd still let Johnny eat Wade's food.

She had to look up into his face, and her eyes were stormy. The long, hot summer had drawn her fine, and she knew the dust and sun had ruined her complexion. She couldn't imagine one man, let alone two, looking at her with hunger in his eyes. She thought bitterly, if women were plentiful in this camp, Wade and Dana wouldn't look at her in that way. She said, "Wade could be right. You could be misleading all those men."

He said evenly, "Wade Samson's like too many men. When the going's easy, they stick. When it toughens . . ."

He grinned at the anger in her eyes. "I'm not judging him. Maybe he was sick the last couple of days. But you heard him say he's not coming back. That makes one less to share in the final cleanup. The gold's there." He pulled a pencil stub from his pocket and used the back of one of her precious menus. She'd seen him do this a dozen times, and resignedly she watched him go through it again.

"We threw a wing-dam across the Sacramento River here," he said, sketching rapidly.

She saw the glow in his eyes and thought, the gold means nothing to him. It's the besting of a problem that carries its appeal.

"The river deepens into a pool just below the dam," he went on. "It's been depositing sand and gravel in that pool for thousands of years." His face had the eager look of a small boy at Christmas time. "And gold along with that sand and gravel. The gold, being heavier, has sunk under the sand and gravel. But it can only sink as far as the bedrock. We've diverted the river. Now we're panning the sand and gravel."

"And found no gold." Her words carried more sting than she intended.

"No," he admitted. "But the channel's deeper in the center of the pool. We'll find it there."

She said, "It's getting close to the rainy season. The mountains are snow-covered already. Melting snow and rain will swell the river. When it goes over your dam, what then?"

HIS FACE was sober, and she knew that had occurred to him, too. "We'll find it before then."

"You won't find it." She wanted to shake his blind faith that the future would always work out right. "You'll have wasted your summer's work. And the work of all those other men."

"Do you think I'd do better working for day wages? What's wrong with you, Sheila?"

She blinked back the tears. "Look at me. I'm wasting my life here like all the rest of you. Look at my hands!" She thrust the work-roughened hands at him. "I'm getting old with nothing to show for it."

"You are," he said gravely. "You're almost twenty-two." He reached for her hands, and she thrust them behind her back. He asked mockingly, "Do you want me to tell you you're beautiful, Sheila? Every man's face here is a mirror that tells you that. Shall I tell you what I think about the color of yours eyes? Shall I—"

"Stop it," she stormed. Those were the words she needed and now, illogically, she didn't want to hear them. "You're just like my father was. He could make fine, smooth talk with empty pockets and no care for the future. He'd have liked a scheme such as yours." Her eyes were brimful of tears, and she didn't care if he saw them.

"He would've," Dana said soberly. "I'm

sorry he didn't live to see it done." He looked accusingly at her. "You didn't get your fears and worries from him. Don't be sorry for the kind of man he was. There's too few like him."

She bridled under his tone. She'd loved her father, but she knew his weaknesses. And that same pack of weaknesses was in Dana Haynes. Her father had brought her here from San Francisco, and he'd dreamed of the tomorrows instead of doing something about the harsh realities of today. He'd died almost a year ago of some malignant fever, and he'd left her barely enough money to open this little restaurant.

She'd struggled since then, trying to accumulate enough money to leave Portuguese Flat. She thought wearily, with the price of everything, she was little better off than when she'd started.

DANA asked gently, "You hate it here, don't you, Sheila?"

She fought to keep her voice from breaking, as she retorted sarcastically, "I love it. I love the dirt and the hardships. I love the tents and the shacks that take the place of proper homes."

He moved to her, and she saw something in his eyes that both delighted and frightened her.

"Stay away from me," she stormed. She knew the promises he was about to make. Her father had always made the same grand, high-sounding promises.

He didn't stop, and she felt the weakness run through her. She threw up her head and said, "You heard Wade say something about our talk last night. I'm promised to him, Dana."

He stopped short, and for a moment his face was carved from rock and his eyes were bleak. He smiled then, just a twisting of the lips that never reached his eyes. "Maybe he's the man for you, Sheila," he murmured. "He likes the soft things, too. Good night," he said with sudden harshness. He lifted the boy from the stool and walked out without looking back.

She stacked the dirty dishes, wondering at the numbness in her. She hadn't promised Wade last night, but she would now. She'd promise him, if he'd take her away from Portuguese Flat.

She didn't know how much time had elapsed when Wade came back. She'd gone mechanically about the familiar routines, willing her mind not to think.

Wade said, "I passed him on the street. From his face—" He paused, not knowing quite how to put it into words, then he blurted out, "What happened, Sheila?"

"Nothing," she said steadily. "I'm tired of listening to dreams. I'm tired of living in dirt and knowing that tomorrow will bring only more dirt."

He said eagerly, "Sheila, I have five thousand in dust I panned before I went into his crazy scheme. It'll give us a start in San Francisco."

He said defensively, against the expression in her eyes, "Let the other fools sink everything they have into that wild idea. A smart man thinks of himself first."

She thought of all the other men who'd given up their meager savings to back Dana and his damming of the river. Then the thought was gone as she felt a fierce exultation that Wade had been smarter than that. "I want to go to San Francisco, Wade," she said.

She gave him her lips, feeling the fierce, eager hunger of his mouth. She thought in a queer, abstract manner, that there was no answering rush of fire in her, but this was what she wanted, this was her security.

She pulled away and said, "Can we leave, soon, Wade?"

His laugh was low and eager. "Very soon, Sheila. A couple of weeks at the most."

She said sharply, "You aren't staying just to see what happens to his scheme?"

His nostrils pinched together at her tone. "I have an interest out there. If they find anything, I'm entitled to my share."

The disloyal thought crossed her mind, *You gave up your share when you quit.* But Wade was right. He was entitled to be paid for his summer's work the same as the rest of them.

He said softly, "Business is over for tonight, Sheila. Let's go for a walk."

She nodded, glad to get out of the res-

taurant. She locked the door behind her, put her hand under his arm and went down the street with him.

IT WAS better when the darkness covered the ugliness. Lamps and candles made warm spots of radiance, and she could almost imagine they were the lights from real homes. She heard a man laugh, and she liked the pleasant sound of it. She squeezed Wade's arm in a sudden excess of feeling.

He talked of the house he would build in San Francisco, of its furnishings. He said, "I saw a long time ago that too few miners make a fortune. Merchandising is the answer. The men who sell the miners their supplies become the wealthy ones. I'm going to be one of those men, Sheila."

He would do what he said, he had the drive, the ambition. That ambition would bring her ease and comfort, and she felt the satisfaction flood through her.

They approached the end of the street, and this portion of it was filled with saloons and gambling halls. Even the darkness couldn't hide the ugliness here. She heard a man's drunken laughter and the shrill, answering laughter of a dance-hall girl and shuddered. She wanted to turn back, and Wade murmured, "Just a minute, Sheila."

He slowed their pace as they passed the First Chance Saloon, and she had the impression he was waiting for someone. Hope Gerard owned that saloon. Sheila knew her when she saw her. Hope Gerard was a comfortably fleshed woman with a large and ready laugh. She did her own entertaining, and she lived well without the necessity of hard work. There were too many women like her, Sheila thought indignantly.

She was tugging at Wade's arm in a burst of impatience when the door of the saloon opened, and she heard a man's quick laugh. She knew that laugh, and in spite of herself, her head jerked around.

She saw Dana and Johnny framed in the oblong of light. She saw the too plump woman laughing up into Dana's face.

Dana said, "I won't forget tonight, Hope."

Hope Gerard said, "It's been my pleasure. You don't come often enough."

Dana laughed, reached down and patted her cheek, then turned and came down the walk.

Sheila's eyes blazed as she stepped forward. "You beast," she said passionately. "Taking Johnny into a place like that!"

She saw the surprise widen his eyes and caught the odor of whiskey on his breath. He hadn't been drinking when he'd been in her restaurant.

He said evenly, "I stopped in for a drink, Sheila. And a little laughter." He said with cruel emphasis, "At least she's honest. She makes no pretense at being other than she is."

Sheila said scornfully, "You'd use that word in connection with her!" She was making too much of this and knew it, but she couldn't check her words.

"Stop it, Sheila," he said wearily. "Come along, Johnny."

Wade put a hand against Dana's chest and shoved him back. He said savagely, "Don't ever speak to Sheila again."

Dana's eyes searched his face. He said slowly, "You saw me go in there tonight, didn't you? Yet you brought her this way. You're not very sure of yourself, are you?" A rush of passion twisted his face, and he hit Wade flush in the mouth.

SHEILA cried out. Wade stumbled backward, mopping at his bleeding lips with the back of his hand. "Damn you, Haynes," he said huskily. "Damn you!"

He sprang forward, his face livid. Sheila heard the splat of his fist against Dana's flesh, and Dana broke backward under it. A curious little smile was fixed on his lips as he murmured, "This has been building up between us for a long time, hasn't it?"

He smashed Wade in the face, and the sound of the blow ripped through Sheila. People ran out of the saloon toward them, and she heard Hope Gerard's high, shrill voice, "Beat his head off, Dana."

Sheila bitterly rebuked herself. Why had she said anything to him? She should've known Dana would take his guilt out on someone else.

Dana fought with a savageness that repelled yet fascinated her. His blows came in a merciless rain, and he had Wade stumbling under them. He hit Wade three times for every one he received, and Wade's face was marked and bleeding. Wade's breath came in soggy gasps as he tried to stem those blows. Men formed a rough circle around them, and their hoarse, excited cries were all for Dana. Wade was all alone. Not completely alone, Sheila thought fiercely. She called, "Hurt him, Wade. Hurt him."

Dana turned his head and looked at her. Wade lunged forward, and a clubbing blow rattled off of Dana's jaw. He staggered back, going down to one knee, and the hurt showed plainly on his face. He shook his head to clear it and said, "I keep making mistakes where you're concerned, Sheila."

He came to his feet, and the grin was gone. He moved in under Wade's flailing fist and planted a set of knuckles deep in Wade's stomach. Wade's mouth flew open, and his grunt held animal pain. He weaved drunkenly, his arms offering feeble resistance. Dana's left hand speared out, bobbing Wade's head back, then the right smashed full against the jaw hinge.

Wade let out a tired little sigh. His knees buckled, his head dropped, and he plunged forward on his face. He lifted himself to hands and knees, then could go no farther. His head hung low, blood dripped from his nose and puddled the dust.

Sheila ran to him and dropped down onto her knees. Her arms went around his neck, and she looked up at Dana with blazing eyes. "I hate you, Dana Haynes. I hate you."

He looked at her with steady eyes, his face a blank. Hope Gerard placed a hand on his arm. "I think this calls for another drink, Dana."

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I believe it does." He took hold of Johnny's hand and walked into the saloon with her.

Sheila helped Wade to his feet, her knees buckling under his weight. "I'll kill him for this," he said thickly.

"Forget it, Wade." There was more sharpness in her voice than she'd intended. Men stared at them, and she wanted to get away as quickly as she could. She led Wade away, and with each step some of his strength returned. He said in black tones, "He surprised me. He had the advantage."

She said mechanically, "It doesn't matter. If you'll come to the restaurant, I'll bandage your cuts."

"No," he said with injured pride. "I'll take care of them myself." He said fiercely, "Don't let him come into your restaurant again, Sheila."

She remembered the look in Dana's eyes. She said bleakly, "He won't."

Wade left her at the restaurant door and stiffly said his good night. She understood that stiffness. It hurt for a man to be battered down before the woman he loved. She said gently, "I'll see you tomorrow," and kissed his bruised cheek.

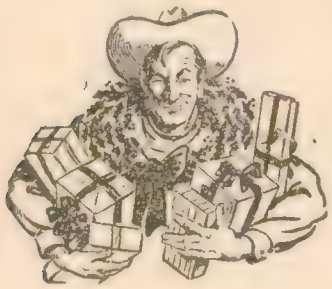
Sleep was a long time coming to her that night. The incident kept flashing vividly through her mind.

FOR THE next three days she didn't see Wade, and she knew he was waiting for his face to heal. She started to go to him, to tell him it didn't matter, then she let him have his pride in this.

## Western Christmas

**By PHIL SQUIRES**

***Gates that open easy,***
***Hearts that open wide,***
***Both are happy symbols***
***Of a Western Christmastide!***



He came in the fourth day. The cuts had drawn together, but the bruises were still livid with color. He said fiercely, "They're laughing at me, Sheila."

She said soothingly, "It doesn't matter, Wade."

Some of the torment went out of his face. He asked huskily, "Can you be ready to leave by the end of the week, Sheila?"

It'd come quicker than she'd expected, and she should be glad. She said troubledly, "Why yes, Wade. The sooner the better."

After he'd left, she stood in the doorway looking at the street. She wouldn't be sorry to leave this, she thought fiercely.

A man raced down the street, and she wondered at the excitement in his face. He stopped two men in front of the restaurant, and Sheila moved out to hear what he was saying.

"Dana thinks we'll hit it today," the man panted. "We've cleaned down to bedrock except for a ten-foot strip."

The news was picked up and swelled the length of the street. Men ran out and joined the growing throng, and they laughed and shouted. This was a big day for the Flat. Not every man here would participate in the cleanup, but all of them could share in the excitement.

For a moment Sheila felt the little stab of elation for Dana, then she thought scornfully, "Some fools are lucky." She was turning back to her restaurant when Wade drove up in a buggy.

He said stiffly, "I thought you'd like to see the end of this."

She stared at him, not understanding why he'd want to go, and he said savagely, "I spent a summer's work there. He can't cut me out entirely."

She was surprised at how his words struck a discordant note in this scene of jubilation, and she was tempted to say something about it. She held her tongue and climbed into the buggy, not sure why she was going.

The dam was four miles from the camp, and neither of them said anything the entire trip. Wade stopped the buggy and helped her to the ground. She looked back along the road, seeing the groups of hurrying men. If everyone in Portuguese Flat wasn't already here, he was on the way. She saw Hope Gerard, her dress making a bright spot of color. She thought angrily, *She would be here.*

She looked up at the crude wing-dam, diverting the flow of the river, the water lapping only an inch or two below its top. The cleanup wasn't any too soon. A few more days, a week at the most, and the river would be over the dam. She saw the scraped, scarred expanse of the river bed, and except for a two-foot stretch in the center, it'd been cleaned down to the permanent rock. Even now miners were cutting into that final tiny finger of gravel and sand and she found their tense, expectant air reaching out and holding her.

THEY dug into that little bank of gravel from both sides and she saw Dana stripped to the waist, the sheen of perspiration gleaming on his shoulders in the hot morning sun. He raised a pickax high over his head, and his muscles bunched for the down stroke. Sheila's throat was hot and dry as she watched him. Dana sank the pickax to the hilt at every blow. And behind him miners scooped up the loosened gravel with wornout shovels and quickly panned it.

She waited for the ringing yell that would announce that the yellow metal had been found, but the miners' faces only grew more tense. They attacked the shrinking bank from both sides, and it was only a foot thick now. She saw it melt before pickax and shovel, saw the last panful washed. Then the man who'd done the washing looked up at Dana with a stupefied face.

A little sigh ran through the crowd, a sad, mournful sound, then the silence was complete. There was a summer's work gone and with it what money the men had. The miners watched Dana with glassy eyes, as though for the moment all power to think had been wiped away.

Dana wearily rolled his shoulders, and his voice carried to her. "I was as wrong as a man could be."

Wade said savagely, "They'll turn on

him now. He's led them wrong, and now we'll see how much they like him."

She saw for the first time how much he'd hoped for it to end this way. He stared hungrily at the scene, his eyes filled with a hot blaze.

The miners wearily gathered up their tools, their faces showing they were still too stunned to think. The thoughts would come in a moment and she was afraid of them.

Dana climbed out of the river bed. He went up the river, looked to see that everyone was out of the way, then opened the flood-gates. The huge and weary old wheel ceased to creak, the river engulfed the few battered tools left in its path, then swept on in its old swift fashion.

Dana's face was unreadable. Johnny came up and thrust his small hand into Dana's big paw, and Dana absently took it.

Sheila couldn't explain the hot stinging in her eyes. Some of the miners were throwing hard glances at Dana, and she heard them muttering. The numbness was wearing off, the keen and hurting disappointment taking its place.

Dana stood balanced on the balls of his feet, his eyes flickering from face to face. A grin twitched at his lip corners, a hard grin with no mirth in it.

Wade breathed harshly beside her. His face was flushed with passion, and his eyes were feverishly bright. He sprang forward and yelled, "Look at him. He's laughing at us. We work all summer for nothing, and he laughs."

FEAR was a solid core inside Sheila as the mutterings rose. The miners were a tight, hostile group, with Wade as the spearpoint, facing Dana and the boy. Dana's grin had disappeared, and his face was hard with an animal wariness. He carefully moved Johnny behind him. His movements were slow and deliberate, as though he were afraid that any abruptness would precipitate violent action.

He said sharply, "We went into this together. We knew the chance we took. We—"

Wade's voice drowned him out. "I say he bilked us. This country has too many of his kind. He's bankrupted the camp. I say we ought to ride him out on a rail."

The miners' agreement was fierce and sustained. Sheila saw that Wade was skilfully building up their disappointment to smash a man he hated. She saw his shallowness, his capacity for hatred, and wondered how she could've been so blind.

Dana turned his head and said, "Get out of here, Johnny." He looked back at the miners, the bunched muscles along his jaw making the lower part of his face hard and knotty.

Dana said savagely, "Go on. Listen to him. He quit before the end. Now, he's using—"

Wade swung his arm forward, and the roar drowned out Dana's words. Sheila saw the first forward surging motion of the group, and for a moment thought her knees wouldn't support her. She drew a deep breath, then ran between Dana and the miners. She faced them, head held high, her face scornful.

She said contemptuously, "You call yourselves men. And you're crying because you're disappointed. This isn't the first time this has happened to you. Every man of you has worked on barren claims. You weren't forced into this. You went into it because you thought you could hit it all at once. Look at Dana. He's as broke as the rest of you. He worked as hard, and he's got as little."

The forward motion stopped, and the miners glanced uncertainly at one another. She'd used practically the same words Dana had used, but because she was a woman, they'd listened to her. She was weak and spent inside, but only contempt showed on her face.

The incredulity on Wade's face changed to savage hatred. "Don't listen to her," he screamed. "She's his woman."

The spark was still in those miners. It would take only a word, a wrong action to fan it into roaring flame. She said in a clear, ringing voice, "Ask Wade if he put everything into this like the rest of you did. Ask him about the five thousand dollars in dust he has hidden away. Ask him how

many times he sneaked into town and ate well while the rest of you were wondering where your next meal was coming from. And you'd listen to *him!*"

The muttering died away. The miners looked at Wade, and the truth of her words was in his shifting eyes. She thought her knees were going to buckle. She'd stopped the men, and the reaction was overpowering.

Wade screamed in pure animal fury. He rushed forward, swept out an arm and knocked her to one side. He hit Dana while the surprise of his rush still held. He used his head as a battering ram, catching Dana in the chest and knocking him over backward. He was kicking at his face before Dana had fully hit the dusty ground. Wade's face was twisted, his lips working with his silent snarling. Sheila felt the hard, merciless constriction of her heart, but no sound came from her. Men formed a rough circle around the fighting pair.

Wade's boot caught Dana in the side, but Dana was rolling, and the force of the kick was minimized. Dana rolled and came up on one knee. Wade rushed in, his foot swinging in another kick. Dana swung his arm like a club, and Sheila heard the smacking sound as it caught Wade's leg. Wade had one foot in the air, and Dana's blow knocked the other from under him. Wade flipped over backward, the dust puffing out from under his falling shoulders.

IT GAVE Dana time to get to his feet, and he stood on widely planted legs, drawing heavily on his lungs.

A voice said in Sheila's ear, "They're really fighting over you."

She turned her head, her indignant words dying as she looked into Hope Gerard's face.

Hope laughed at Sheila's blazing eyes. "You picked the wrong man from the start. He tried to use the miners to get rid of Dana. He knows better than you do how you still feel about Dana."

The blood pounded in Sheila's face. She said furiously, "I don't. I don't. He belongs to you. I wouldn't want him—" she finished weakly—"after that."

The two men circled each other like hungry cats. Hope said, "You little fool! He came to me to borrow money to buy food for his miners. No one else in the Flat would loan him any." She said with candid honesty, "I have an interest in this camp. If it goes broke, I have to move, too." She laughed at Sheila again. "Your Wade has been to my place more than anyone else. But he always sneaks in."

The blood ran painfully through Sheila's face, and she wanted to cover it with her hands. She looked at Hope and saw the truth in her eyes. She whispered, "Can't anyone stop them?"

"No," Hope said flatly. "It has to be settled between them."

Wade rushed Dana, butting with his head. They came together with an ugly, crashing sound, and Dana threw Wade from him. He followed with a series of quick half steps. His fist came around in a wide arc and exploded in Wade's face.

One of the miners shouted, "Kick his face in, Dana," and his cry was picked up by the others. Sheila saw that the mercurial mood of the mob had changed. They were behind Dana again, and she closed her eyes in thankfulness.

Wade went down heavily, and his shoulders crashed into legs of watching men, almost spilling them on top of him. He lay there, panting, then slowly rolled over on his stomach. One hand went under him. Then he turned cat-like, jumping to his feet, and Sheila saw the sun rays hit and reflect from something metallic in his hand. The knife came into full view, its blade pointed wickedly at Dana's stomach.

A hoarse "Ah," ran through the crowd, and Sheila screamed a futile warning, "Dana! He's got a knife!"

DANA moved at him with slow, steady steps, and Wade crouched, the knife making little stabbing circles.

The blade flashed up as they closed in on each other. Dana grabbed for the knife arm, chopping out savagely with the edge of his other palm. It smashed across the bridge of Wade's nose, and Wade's hoarse sobbing grunt was loud. Dana's back was

to Sheila, and she couldn't see what had happened to the knife.

She saw Wade's broken face, the blood pouring in a red curtain over his mouth and chin. She saw terror come into his eyes, and he whirled suddenly, running away with fear-hastened strides.

She saw the knife then. It was buried to the hilt, high in Dana's shoulder. The red was a little river pushing its way down over his arm and chest. There was shock and hurt behind that fixed smile. He reached up in a slow, careful motion and pulled the knife from his shoulder. He dazedly looked at its stained blade, then tossed it aside.

His motion broke the spell holding the miners. Sheila heard their low growl as they turned after Wade.

"Let him go," Dana said. "He isn't worth it."

His words checked the miners. They looked at each other uncertainly, then slowly moved toward Dana. But this time there was no hostility in their faces, only a shame and an embarrassment.

A big, raw-boned miner said, "Dana, there's other rivers to dam," and it was their apology to him.

His grin had life in it as he said, "Sure, sure. It's a big country."

Sheila pushed through the miners packed around him. She looked at him steadily and said, "A woman can get foolish ideas, Dana."

The glad wonder spread across his face as he read her eyes. He said, "Sheila," and reached for her, and she read the intent in his eyes.

She said hastily, "We'll have to fix that shoulder."

Her hands tore strips off her skirt, and she didn't care how many eyes were watching. She bound the strips around his shoulder, and as she touched his flesh, that wonderful exultance started at her fingertips and spread through her body.

The glow faded from his eyes, and his body sagged. He said woodenly, "I'm grateful to you, Sheila. You stopped them. But I have nothing to offer. I failed all these men. And I'd fail you. You were right when you said I was a dreamer."

She saw a truth unknown to her before. "This country needs leaders, Dana. These men need someone they believe in enough to follow. You'll think of something else."

The shine came back into his eyes. "I was thinking the river could still be made to pay. We could raft logs down it. The cities are starved for lumber." He said softly, "The boys are hungry, Sheila. Would you feed them?" He reached down and picked up Johnny. "This is all the security I have."

She held the boy closely to her breast, and she smiled through her tears. "I wouldn't want better." He'd go away from her time and time again, there'd be long periods of waiting, but he'd always return. And the waiting and the place would make no difference—not as long as the promise of his return was always there. She could even live in a place like Portuguese Flat, if he were coming back to it.

He turned from her, lifting his voice, announcing to the miners that she was going to feed them. She heard their joyful roar, and her smile grew. They were his men again. He'd lost them only for a tiny while until they'd gotten over the first shock of their disappointment. He would never completely belong to her, she would always have to share him. She tucked a hand under his arm and walked beside him. She wouldn't have it any different.

# A Tree

*"Oh, Clete, I'm frightened!"*

AFTER the massive oak furniture was crowded into the new home, Laura Allison regarded it despairingly. "It looks terrible," she complained.

Her father laughed. "You were determined to bring it along," he reminded her.

"Well, I did want something of Mama's," Laura retorted. "And it's a lovely suite. But...."

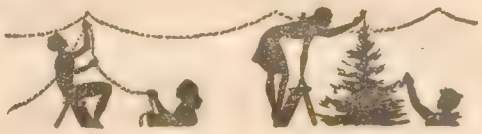
She caught Papa's eye. Her redhead's temper began to rise. Back home in Boston the golden oak table and the matching chairs with blue velvet seats had been the very latest thing. But in a long dugout, crowded into the side of a hill, they certainly didn't seem to be good style.

Tandy, who was only six as against Laura's sixteen going on seventeen, took her thumb out of her mouth long enough to say, "Pretty!" Laura caught her hand just in time to stop the thumb. "Tandy! How many times must I tell you?"

# For Tandy

*By Dorothy Roseborough*

*IT WAS LAURA'S first Christmas in a dugout. Could she turn into cheer the blizzard without and within?*



The corners of Tandy's mouth drooped. Papa said hurriedly "Let her alone, Laura. Doesn't hurt her. She needs something to comfort her since she lost her doll." He hugged the little girl to him. "Don't you care, honey," he consoled her. "We'll have a tree and fixings for Christmas—that's just a few weeks. And you shall have a dolly for your birthday. Maybe I'll have lots of money by then, baby."

Laura thought, *That's what you've been saying ever since the crash.* And then Laura stopped herself. She remembered all the courage and invincible optimism he'd shown after the twin disasters of her mother's death and the financial crash. Converting all he could into cash, Henry Allison had gone West, taken over a deserted homestead with a well and dugout already on it, and now had brought his two daughters out to New Mexico.

This place, Laura knew, would be no easier on him than on her. Looking at the boarded walls of the dugout, she saw trickles of dry dirt running between the cracks. She felt the grit of it in her hair and between her teeth. From the hillside extended a sod-covered roof, its rafters supported by wooden walls. A door and two small windows lighted the outside room.

It was raining and suddenly Laura discovered adobe mud dripping from the sods. The golden oak furniture was her first thought. She and her father were struggling to move it under the shelter of the hill when a tall blond young man appeared in the doorway.

"Need any help?" he asked. "The fellow who set those sods didn't make any too good a job of it." He smiled at Laura. "You're a mighty little trick to handle that heavy stuff," he drawled. "Better let me take over."

*Well, he certainly did that,* Laura fumed, remembering later how unceremoniously he'd walked in.

"Bossy thing!" she said afterwards to Papa. "If that's an example of our neighbours.... And he actually smelled! Didn't you notice? Mud and wet sheepskin and—"

"And sweat," Allison observed, grinning. He wiped his forehead. "You probably noticed it on me too. As a matter of fact," he added wearily, "I'm getting used to it. Cletus Moore's a good neighbour. Seems to me he's a pretty fine fellow. I'm glad you had the sense to ask him to eat with us."

"It was nice of him to come over and help," Laura admitted. "But, goodness, Papa, there's scarcely enough room for ourselves as it is."

"We'd better stack those chairs on top of the table," Papa said. "Get them out of the way."

He looked tired and discouraged. *He needs someone to help him,* Laura thought.

*Someone who knows the country. He has so much to do he doesn't know where to begin.*

CLETUS MOORE came often to the homestead after that, and never without some rabbits or a mess of quail to contribute towards the meal. Frail little Tandy, who caught cold easily and had to spend many hours lying in her bunk, adored him. She chattered incessantly to the big young man, who sat near her listening silently and watching Laura as she went about her work. He wasn't exactly shy, Laura decided, he just didn't talk a great deal.

Clete always had time to help Papa. "Me, I'm all snugged down for the winter," he would say in his slow drawl. "Let me give you a hand with that fence." They'd go out together, put in a good morning's work, and come back to eat enormously at the noon hour.

Watching Laura dish up fried rabbit and beans at one of those meals, Allison remarked, "There's something special about the men out here. They get work done with less trouble than I have thinking about it."

"Thinkin's the hardest work I know of," Clete said solemnly.

Allison laughed, then sobered. "Wish I could pitch in the way you do," he said and sighed.

At the sound, Laura gave him a quick glance. "You do plenty," she retorted.

"He does too much," Clete drawled. "After a while a fellow gets the swing of it. When he works easy and mechanical, he don't know he's workin'."

With an unreasoning resentment, Laura regarded Clete's heavy shoulders, his great muscular arms. *You're young,* she thought bitterly. *You can do twice as much as Papa. He's been tired ever since we came here.* She said "Only three days until Christmas, Papa. Stay home the rest of the day and help me. I'm going to be busy."

Clete finished his coffee. "Thanks for the dinner, Miss Laura. Now that you mention it. I've got some homework too."

Tandy coughed suddenly; he went over to take her hand. "You quiet that foolishness right now," he ordered with mock severity, and Tandy giggled, looking up at him with adoration in her dark eyes.

That evening Laura finished the Christmas decorations, using wire cutters to make flowers and stars from cans that her father hammered into flat sheets. The biggest star was to go on the topmost branch of the tree. *If we can find one,* Laura worried. Nothing bigger than mesquite grew on their rolling land. But toward the west, their snow-covered peaks showing sharp against the sky, the Twin Brothers Mountains rose abruptly from the prairie. Black forests climbed their sides. Laura could distinguish the clear outlines of scattered trees on the foothills.

"Maybe those trees are pines," she remarked to her father at breakfast time. "You might drive over there and see."

Allison looked up from his milk-and-sop. "That's a notion, Laura. I could saw off a good-sized branch," he reflected. "There'd be needles and cones to decorate the dugout. Make the place look fine. I'll take the wagon out right now."

COUGHING, Tandy wriggled impatiently in her bunk. "Take me, Papa." Her voice was hoarse and rasping. "I want to go too," she begged. "I'm so tired of bed."

"It's too cold for you, honey." Wrapping the blanket round her, Allison took her in his arms. "Be a good girl now. You shall help fix up the tree," he promised, kissing her.

Tandy put her arms round his neck. "Maybe I'll get a doll," she whispered. "Oh, Papa, I do want one. More than anything."

Allison hesitated. Suddenly he hugged her hard. "All right!" he exclaimed, with a strange fierceness. "Santa will bring you a doll. The prettiest he can find. And there'll be something for each one of us. We'll have a real Christmas, Tandy. Just like home."

Startled, Laura protested, "But Papa, have you enough—"

"Never mind that now," he interrupted.

"We'll manage. We're going to keep this Christmas." Putting Tandy down, he said cheerfully, "I guess it isn't so far to the mountains, but you'd better give me some cornbread and bacon for midday, Laura." He glanced at the wood in the box by the stove. "You've enough to get along until I come back," he said, and shrugging into his sheepskin coat, went out to hitch up.

By noon a freezing wind was blowing from the snow-capped mountains. Laura shivered as she closed the lot gate. The wood pile needed replenishing, but of course Papa would be home in a few hours. In spite of that assurance, she felt an instinctive warning as she gathered an armload of wood. *I'll use as little as possible,* she decided. *Just enough to keep the room warm for Tandy.*

By late afternoon the wind died down. The sky clouded over with a peculiar leaden cast; a few small flakes of snow drifted aimlessly on the still air. Looking toward the mountains, Laura saw that they were hidden, completely blotted out by a grey curtain that, extending from the sky, seemed to blend into the earth. When she opened the door, the intense cold struck her like a blow in the face. Tying a woolen muffler over her head, Laura ran out to the lot. Fear jumped in her mind as she piled sticks of wood on her arm. This would be the last load. She said aloud, very carefully and as if answering a question, "Of course Papa's all right. He'll be home any time now."

THE WORDS sounded brave to the silence, but Laura felt fear behind them. A sudden panic invaded her. She ran to the barn, found an empty sack, and hurrying frantically, scraped up every chip of wood she could find. From the east section line a horseman entered the homestead gate. Laura recognized the red and white pony as Clete's. Her feeling of relief was only temporary, the strange sensation of pressing hurry forced her into activity. Running to the dugout, she came back with water buckets to be filled at the mill. Clete nodded his approval as he dismounted.

"That's the idea," he said. "There's trouble comin', sure enough."

"Clete, what is it?" Laura exclaimed. She pulled the muffler closer over her head. "I've never felt such a bite in the air before. It's terribly cold!"

"Wait until the wind gets up again," he answered soberly. "Look at that!" He pointed to the darkening mass of cloud. "We're in for some kind of a blizzard, if I don't miss my guess. I came over to see what I could do before things bust wide open. Where's your dad?"

"He's not here," Laura cried, clutching the young man's arm. "Oh, Clete, I'm frightened! He should have been home hours ago."

"Now take it easy, Miss Laurie." Clete put his hand over hers. "He'll be back soon, for sure. Which way did he go?"

"Over to the mountains." Laura choked back her tears. "Only as far as the foothills," she explained. "He went to get a tree for Christmas."

She thought it must be the livid sky that made Clete's tanned face so colorless. He looked sick for an instant, and a white line showed round his lips. He said, in a queer strangled voice, "The Twin Brothers? He went there? But, Miss Laura—" He stood staring at her as if he couldn't believe what she said. "Didn't he know it's 'most twenty-five miles to the foothills?" he exclaimed. "With a team and heavy wagon he can't make it back, maybe couldn't even get there."

"That's absurd!" Laura retorted. "Anyone can see it isn't more than a few miles."

"Yeah. Sure," he answered slowly. "Seems like you could hit 'em with a rock. But that's the way it is out here, Miss Laura. A man can travel all day and those hills won't look any nearer than when he started. Something in the air."

Picking up the filled buckets, he walked rapidly to the dugout. "Way I see it," he said, "your dad would follow the road quite a ways. Even if the trail's lost, I can make a pretty good guess where he'd start angling off to the foothills." He put the buckets on the plank table. "Now, don't you get scared, Miss Laurie. Hang blan-

kets over the entrance to the room under the hill. Stay in there where it's warmer. It's liable to be mighty cold tonight." He looked at the wood she had carried in. "That all?" he asked.

Laura nodded. Clete whistled a low note. He said urgently, "Be careful with your fuel."

"Tandy's sick" Laura murmured. "She must be kept warm."

For an instant their eyes met. Then Clete's voice, hard and determined broke the brief silence. "I've got to hurry," he told her. "No matter what you burn, you keep a fire goin'."

Her eyes glassy with fever, Tandy lay watching as Clete lashed a rope around blankets and tarp. "I don't feel good," she whispered, rolling her head restlessly. "I wish Papa would come. I wish I had my dolly."

When Laura and Clete went out to the lot, a gust of wind whirled dust from their footsteps. Clete gestured to the lead-colored clouds, blacker now, and with a livid line of mist rising before them. "Snow," he said abruptly. He gripped Laura's hand. "Don't go out while it's snowin'. You promise me that?"

She nodded, and mounting, he turned his horse to the gate. Then he stopped to untie a small sack hanging from the saddle.

"Forgot this." Clete dropped the package into Laura's hands. "Here's a doll I made for Tandy's Christmas. Maybe she'd like to have it tonight instead." He smiled down in a way that, Laura discovered, made his quiet face almost handsome. "Take good care of yourselves," he said. "So long."

WATCHING as he rode along the section line, Laura saw that the storm was appreciably nearer, the blowing mist before it a startling light against a rushing blackness. A gust of wind struck the mill wheel. Whirling out of control, it pumped a full stream of water before flattening itself to the vane. Laura caught and secured the cut-off. As she did so the wild force of the storm came upon her, a force so strong that she leaned all her weight on it in order to remain on her feet. A stinging pain slashed at her face, and she pulled the muffler over her cheeks. Not until, gaining the shelter of the hillside, she opened the door to the dugout did she realize that particles of ice formed a crusted mask on the wool.

For a moment Laura felt deafened in the sudden stillness of the room. Then she heard Tandy cry out. Above the child's screams came a steady roaring sound, the whistle of wind in the chimney pipe that protruded from the solid earth ceiling. Tandy clutched her arms around her sister's neck.

"Oh Laurie! I'm scared!" she wailed. "What is it? What's that noise?"

"Just the wind, honey," Laura laughed, releasing herself. "It sounds like the ocean back home. Remember how it shouted and banged last winter?"

Tandy stopped whimpering. "But there isn't any sea here" she said doubtfully.

"The prairie's the sea, and the wind flying over makes the sound of the waves."

After a pause Tandy whispered, "Laurie, isn't Papa coming home again?"

Laura's heart skipped a beat. "Of course he is," she answered, trying to hide the fear in her own mind. "He'll come back with Clete when the storm dies down a little. They might have to find themselves a shelter tonight."

"A cave, maybe?" Lying back on her pillow, Tandy stared up at the timbered roof of the dugout. Suddenly she giggled. "We're the only people I know who live in a cave," she announced. "All cosy and warm and the wind blowing. But it's kind of lonesome without Papa," Tandy added dolefully. "I do wish I had my dolly tonight."

"You can have one right now if you'll quit your fussing," Laura laughed. "Clete made you a doll for Christmas."

FLUSHED and excited, Tandy sat up to unwrap the crumpled paper package. *Her dolls used to come in tissue paper tied with ribbons,* Laura thought. *They had smooth pink cheeks and their hair was real.* Hating to see the child's dis-

appointment in a home-made doll, Laura moved toward the blanket-covered doorway. Tandy's voice, full of laughter and delight, called her back.

"Oh, I love her! I love her!" Tandy exclaimed. "Look, Laurie! She isn't a bit like the others."

She held up a doll made of a small cotton sack stuffed with rags and tied in to form neck and waistline. Red hair, which Laure felt sure came from a cow's tail, was sewn to the head in a long parting, braided in two pigtails, and finished with bows of green string. Arched brows and lashes of coarse black thread accentuated green-painted eyes. An equally brilliant barn red made a smiling mouth. A blue bandanna draped an armless, legless body with a waist pulled in tight by a knotted leather whang string.

Laura looked and laughed aloud. Holding the red-haired, green-eyed doll against her shoulder, she glanced at her own red-headed, green-eyed reflection in the mirror. *Clete's clever,* she thought. *He has a sense of humor too.* With a curious detachment, Laura stood watching a slow flood of color rise over her throat and cheeks.

It was not the delicate work of Clete's big hands that surprised Laura as much as Tandy's pleasure. All her restlessness gone, the little girl ate her supper of meal and milk without rebelling. She went to sleep with the odd little doll hugged in her arms.

Early in the morning, Laura pulled aside the blankets hanging over the entrance to the outer room. The shock of cold frightened her. Snow plastered the panes of the small windows. She stood in semi-darkness, listening to the steady roar of the wind.

*Don't let the fire go out,* Clete had warned. *Burn anything!*

Looking round at their few possessions, Laura tried to decide which would be missed the least. Not the rough bunk where her father slept, she thought. Not the shelves and barrels holding their supplies, or the lone bench made to fit exactly under the plank table when pushed against the wall after meal time. *There's nothing we can do without,* Laura realized. They could not be spared, these everyday makeshift things that gave workable comfort to their life. She thought of the heavy chairs in the dugout, piled one on the other, taking up the valuable space needed for mere living.

A memory came to her of her mother, merry, careless, pretty with the fragile beauty that was Tandy's inheritance.

Her mother had been so proud of those golden oak chairs. Laura could remember the day they'd come and her mother happily unpacking them and arranging them in the dining room. They seemed, somehow, a last link.

And then Laura had another memory. It was of when she was smaller and her mother had taken her out for a walk. It had been summer, and a sudden thunderstorm had caught them a long way from home. Drenched, and more than a little scared by the loud thunderclaps, Laura had shivered and shivered.

Her mother had looked down at her with worry on her brow. Then she'd taken the

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ridiculous long feather boa from around her neck and wrapped Laura up in it. It had dragged on the wet ground and Laura had stepped on it, but her mother had only laughed and said, "My girl warm now?"

Recalling the scene, Laura smiled. "Mother wouldn't care," she murmured. "Mother thought everything was fun."

Taking the small hatchet from its place behind the door, she went back into the dugout and the golden oak chairs. They would make a lovely, red-gold fire.

LATER in the day the wind dropped. In the quiet and warmth of the room under the hill, Tandy contentedly played mother and baby with the new doll. She seemed over the worst of her cold. Drowsing by the stove, Laura was aroused by a sudden shout from the lot. She ran to the outer room, and pushing open the door, blinked her eyes in a dazzle of sunshine. Stamping the snow from their boots, Clete and her father came in, bringing with them the fragrance of pine and fresh air.

"Papa! Oh, Papa!" Laura cried, flinging her arms round him. "We thought you'd *never* come home."

Allison took her in a bear hug that lifted her freet from the ground. His mustache felt frost-cold as he kissed her cheek. "We had to hole up, honey. Lucky for me that Clete came along." He shrugged, grinning wryly. "I guess I'm still pretty much of a tenderfoot," he admitted. "But I'm learning."

Tandy rushed at him, and he swung her onto his shoulder. "We have the tree, baby But I'm sorry there won't be a doll this time."

"I've got one," Tandy exulted. "Look! The nicest one I've ever had. Clete made her, and she looks just like Laura."

"Too bad you had to break up some of that furniture," Clete said hurriedly. "Wish I'd had time to rustle some wood for you, Miss Laura."

"If it hadn't been for you. . . ." she murmured, holding out her hand.

He reddened.

"Didn't do a thing any neighbor wouldn't have done."

He stood with his fingers clasped over hers, as if reluctant to release them. Laura stole a glance at him. He was smiling at her with the warm smile that made his quiet face so pleasant. He said, "It will be a Merry Christmas, after all."

"And a wonderful New Year," Laura laughed.

Their eyes met and held a long moment. A message passed between them, a question and an answer. Something moved in Laura's heart. She said a little breathlessly, "Clete, let's decorate the dugout tonight. I've made a wonderful star for you to put on the very topmost branch of Tandy's tree."

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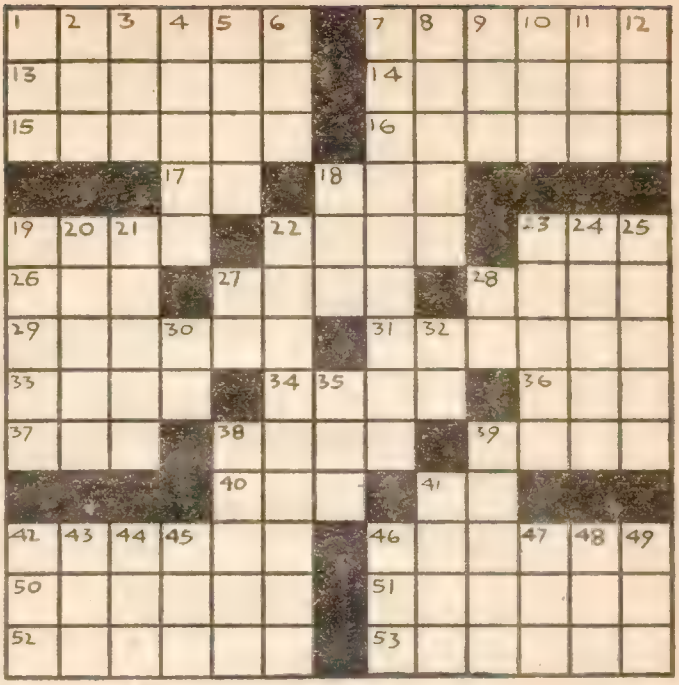
## FISH TALES IDAHO STYLE

**IDAHOANS not only see flying disks but they also tell strange fish stories like a Boise resident who caught a twelve-inch trout on Main Street. Not to be outdone a stay-at-home fisherman caught a fifteen-inch sucker on his lawn; another caught a seventeen-inch carp in his basement. A real fisherman decided to do it the tough way by going out on the streams. So he caught a six-pound sucker and like all good troutmen made the air blue with explosive disgust—until he cut the trash fish open and found a good-sized trout inside!**

**Witnesses produced on request, say the authors of these tall tales!**

——*Ferris Weddle*

# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



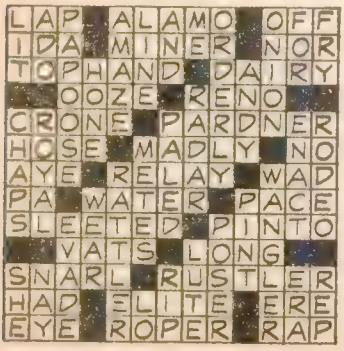
*The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

ACROSS

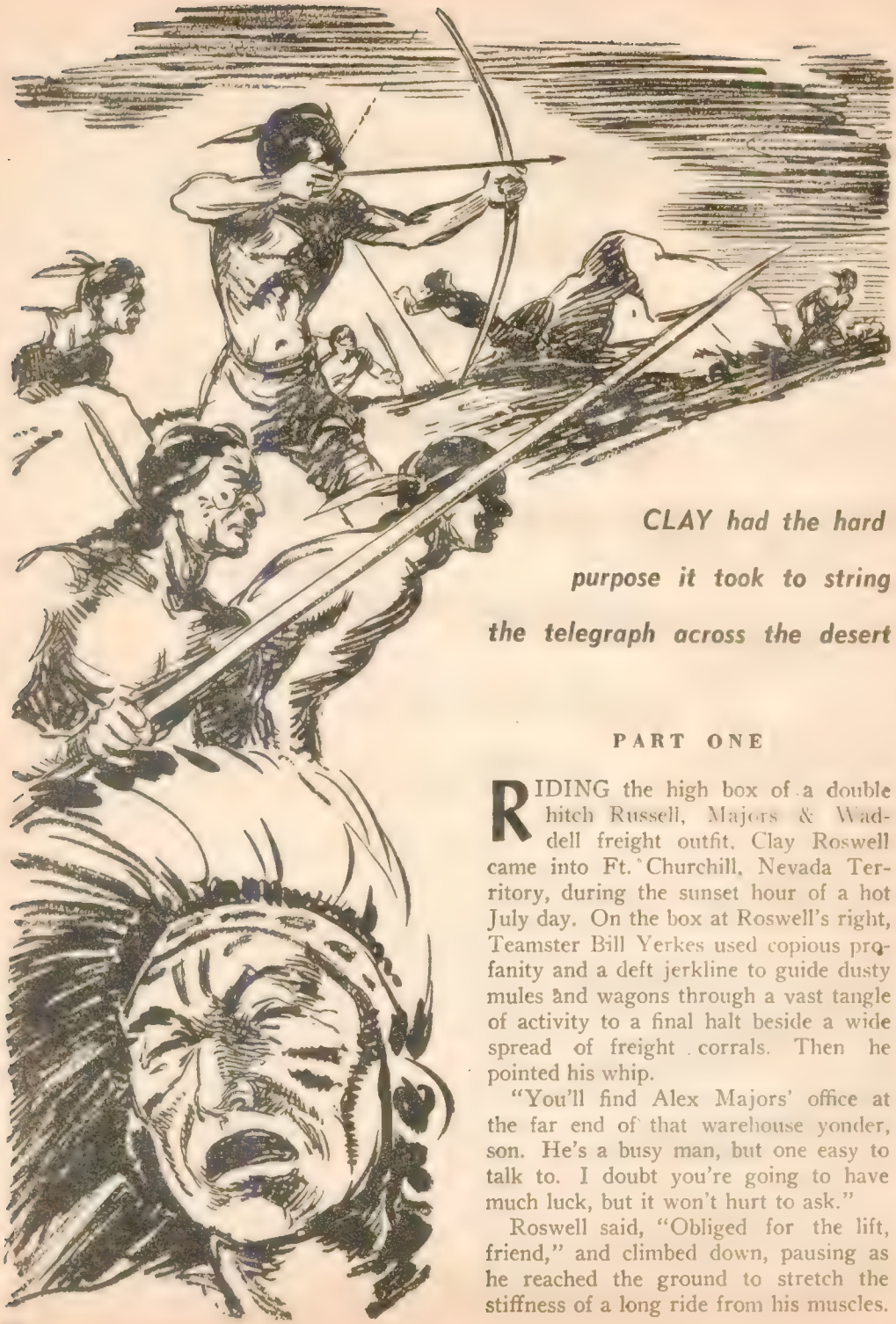
1. Indian pony
7. Cowboy
13. Kitchen utensil
14. Less difficult
15. Western squatter
16. Building for horses
17. At home
18. Devoured
19. Rabbit
22. Old
23. Crow's call
26. To be in debt
27. Mast
28. Mountain lion
29. Horse's fast gait
31. Approached
33. Operatic solo
34. Brother of Cain
36. To finish
37. Clear profit
38. To pronounce indistinctly
39. Whirlpool
40. Very warm
41. Chopping tool
42. Slow duet dance
46. Ascended
50. Monarchs
51. To repair a shoe
52. City in Kansas
53. Western industry

DOWN

1. To study
2. Monkey
3. Affirmative
4. To loosen a knot
5. Observed
6. To make a mistake
7. Sagebrusher
8. Appraised
9. Man's name
10. Pen point
11. To solidify
12. Metallic rock
18. Turkish title
19. Navajo Indian lodge
20. Conscious
21. Illuminated again
22. Spotted breed of horse
23. Healed
24. To correct
25. Cowboy
27. Therefore
28. Dad
30. Spanish article
32. Elevated railway
35. However
38. To evade work
39. To have being
41. Region
42. Skill
43. Instrumental duet
44. High mountain
45. Command to horses
46. Part of a circle
47. Drunkard
48. House addition
49. Born




*Solution to puzzle in preceding issue*



***CLAY had the hard purpose it took to string the telegraph across the desert***

PART ONE

RIDING the high box of a double hitch Russell, Majors & Waddell freight outfit, Clay Roswell came into Ft. Churchill, Nevada Territory, during the sunset hour of a hot July day. On the box at Roswell's right, Teamster Bill Yerkes used copious profanity and a deft jerkline to guide dusty mules and wagons through a vast tangle of activity to a final halt beside a wide spread of freight corrals. Then he pointed his whip.

"You'll find Alex Majors' office at the far end of that warehouse yonder, son. He's a busy man, but one easy to talk to. I doubt you're going to have much luck, but it won't hurt to ask."

Roswell said, "Obliged for the lift, friend," and climbed down, pausing as he reached the ground to stretch the stiffness of a long ride from his muscles.

# Wire IN THE WIND

## by L. P. HOLMES

He had a Texan's tallness, with the lean flanks and compact hips of a man grown up in the saddle. His chest had a good lift, and his shoulders were flat and square and solid. There was a touch of the aquiline to his features, giving them a rugged, forceful cast, though tempered with a certain taciturn reserve. Against the desert's burned darkness of his skin his eyes were stone grey. Under the pushed-back brim of his battered old hat his hair lay thick and brown and pretty well hiding the line of a not to ancient scar above his right temple. In his veins the vigor of twenty-seven years burned strongly.

So this was Ft. Churchill, western gateway to the desert stretch of the Pony Express. A wild frontier town, boiling with dust and action and the tumultuous fever of a nation on the move. Here was the eastern fringe of the town, while beyond the northern limit lay the military post. And up there, even as Roswell paused for this first look around, the flag was floating slowly groundward from its tall mast, while bugles sang retreat in a high, sweet tenor.

Roswell circled the sprawling swing of the corrals, dodged lumbering wagons and sweating, laboring strings of mules. Whips snaked out, cracking like pistol shots. Teamsters yelled at their mules, yelled at each other, and swapped curses with indiscriminate profligacy. After the quiet of the desert, this place was bedlam in Roswell's ears.

Things were a little clearer off to the right, and Roswell worked that way. Here towered long piles of slim, tapered logs, freshly cut and peeled, still oozing resin, the tang of which cut through the dust and touched the nostrils with a hot, piny fragrance. There were several wagons unloading these timbers, and as Roswell paused to watch, a girl came into sight.

She made a slim, light-stepping figure, sturdily clad in boots, short skirt and open-throated blouse. Her bared head gleamed like beaten copper in the sun's last radiance. She stopped beside a tally man who was making some entries in a note book. She stood talking to him, her feet slightly spread, her hands on her hips in a manner almost boyishly free and untrammeled.

An unloaded wagon pulled away and a loaded one creaked up to take its place. A couple of men swarmed over the load, pry bars in hand, loosening the chains which held the load of logs in place. The girl and the tally man, exchanging talk, turned and started away. It was at this moment, as the retaining chains clanked to the ground, that a log, not too well placed on the load to begin with, started to slide.

FOR AN inanimate thing, the log seemed to acquire a sudden malevolence. It came off the wagon with a bounding twist, struck the earth and lashed forward in a wicked, rolling charge. The girl and the tally man, their backs to the log, had no slightest inkling of what was coming at them.

There was no time to yell a warning. Clay Roswell's act was one of pure instinct, without conscious thought. In one long leap he was beside the girl. He caught her up bodily and tried to jump the crazed, lunging log. He got almost clear. The log clipped one foot, knocking it out from under him, spilling him and the girl. As Roswell fell, he heard a man's hard, agonized cry.

Roswell took most of the impact of the fall on his right side and shoulder, but the girl, cushioned in his arms, knew no hurt at all, except to her startled and fiery dignity. Sizzling with anger, she tore loose from him.

"You brute!" she raged.

Before she could say more, one of the unloading crew was lifting her to her feet and blurting anxiously, "Miss Kate! You're not hurt. That log—it got away!"

Now came the tally man's anguished cry again, this time coherently. "My leg—it's broken! The log—it broke my leg!"

The girl turned to stare. Clay Roswell got to his feet, one of them still numb from the log's impact. The girl swung back to face him again, her face pale, her eyes very big. She began to stammer.

"I didn't realize. I'm sorry I said—!"

"Forget it," cut in Roswell. "We were both lucky."

Men were already grouped about the luckless tally man, doing what they could for him. Roswell, limping slightly, headed on for the warehouse Bill Yerkes had pointed out to him. How light and slim that girl had been in his arms! And a regular wildcat.

At the Pony Express office men hurried in and out. Teamsters reporting on loads successfully delivered to the lonely way stations along the hazardous trail. Teamsters checking out more loads. Express riders off duty or waiting to take over a relay. All young, these riders were, lithe and sun-tanned, saddle-sure and full of a reckless hardihood. Then there were clerks and warehouse men rushing about with lists and other paper work to be haggled and argued over.

In one corner of the office a raw-boned man with a rippling black beard sat at a desk. All activity plainly revolved about him. Clay Roswell took a place against the wall and waited a chance to speak.

From outside, at first, just a growing echo cutting through the solid rumble of other activity, then as a pounding rataplan came the sharp whip of speeding hoofs. A hostler stuck his head in at the door.

"Pony Bob Haslam coming in," he announced. "Jay Kelly, your mount's ready!"

A dark, wiry rider moved toward the door. "All right, Snuff."

Aside from Clay Roswell and the man at the desk, all others in the room followed the dark rider outside, a note of excitement in their manner. This Roswell understood. He'd seen the same thing happen at relay stations all across the desert stretch. The arrival and departure of the express, no matter how many times a man

might witness it, never lost its lifting thrill.

Even the stodgiest of men realized that this thing was epic. Men and horses against the wide miles, with time ever crowding at their shoulders, and raw danger always spurring beside them. The Pony Express! Ten days from San Francisco, at the edge of the western sea, to St. Joe, Missouri, half a continent away. And around these reckless, speeding riders was tied all the rest. For the express rider and his horse was the pulse beat, the throbbing heart of the whole enterprise.

EVEN the bearded man at the desk leaned back from his work and listened, a spark lighting up his tired eyes. For he was one of the three men who had conceived this epic thing and made it work.

The pound of hoofs built to a peak, then came to a trampling halt outside the door. There was the mutter of a brief word or two, the slap of the leather mochilla being shifted from one saddle to another, then fresh hoofs exploding into action and beating away into the long distance.

A rider, grey with dust but still moving jauntily, came in and said, "Haslam reporting, Mr. Majors."

The bearded man nodded. "And right on time, Bob. How are things across the desert?"

"Quiet enough from here to Shell Crossing. But there are some Goshiutes stirring around the Egan Canyon run. Sam Keetley had some arrows sailed his way coming through the aspens at Rosebud Pass. The Indians are getting bolder all the time. If the military would do more scouting and less drilling, it would help."

Alex Majors shrugged, smiling faintly. "The military will always be the military, Bob."

The rider went out, and now Alex Majors looked at Clay Roswell. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Is there any chance of getting on as an express rider, Mr. Majors?"

"Son" said Alex Majors, "I could muster the equal of a cavalry troop from the waiting list ahead of you. You're a full year too late."

Roswell stood quietly for a moment, his thoughts flashing back in dark retrospect. "Was afraid that would be the answer," he said slowly. "A year ago was when I had hoped to ask. Well, it's water under the bridge now."

Alex Majors was a kindly man. His glance touched the faded, threadbare, almost ragged condition of Clay Roswell's clothes.

"If you're up against it," he said, "maybe we could find something for you to do around the corrals. But even that kind of job can't last very long. Son, six months from now the Pony Express will be just a memory."

Roswell's head came up, surprise touching his face. "I don't understand."

"Within the next week or two," said Alex Majors, "the California State Company proposes to start the building of their new telegraph line. Building will begin from this end and from Salt Lake simultaneously. When they meet, out in the desert somewhere, it means a tie-in all the way to St. Joe, for the eastern stretch is already pretty much done. That day, the Pony Express is through."

"I'd heard a rumor or two of somehing of the sort along the trail," admitted Roswell slowly. "But nobody seemed to take much count in it, Mr. Majors. Do you think they can really do it? Pretty rough and wild country between here and Salt Lake."

"They'll do it," said Alex Majors decisively. "They'll have their troubles, of course, just as we've had. But Jack Casement will lick the trouble. He's in charge at this end, and he's a good man. Also, I understand he's looking for more good men. Now if I were young again and wanted to have a hand in the doing of something big, in a big way, I'd go have a talk with Casement and see what he had to offer."

Clay Roswell had so long thought of the Pony Express as something too full of romance and color ever to die, it was a disturbing thing to hear a man like Alex Majors say its days were numbered.

"That's tough about the express, Mr. Majors. There'll never be anything like it again."

Alex Majors shrugged, spread his hands. "It's a changing world and moving fast. We've had our day, served our purpose. There's no profit, son, in moaning about progress. I try and be a realist about such things. But they'll remember us. And what more can any man ask than a chance to carve himself some small niche in history?"

For a short moment, Alex Majors mused over this thought, then shook himself and bent again to the work on his desk.

"You go look up Jack Casement, son. I'm sure he'll have something for you. You'll find him at the Shoshone Bar, most likely. That's where most of the important business of this town is talked over and settled. Good luck!"

FT. CHURCHILL, Nevada Territory, in a July twilight. Fogged with dust, feverish with activity, electric with vision and purpose. Crowded with people and wagons. Life at a hard, rumbling boil. Moving slowly through it all, Clay Roswell would have been something less than human if he'd remained untouched by the spirit of the place, by its ferocious activity. Things daring and tremendous were in the air, great new ventures in the march of empire, and all men seemed more or less drunk with the promise of them.

Dusk was thickening and lights began coming on all across the town, throwing thin, dust-fogged gleams from doors and windows. Ahead loomed a big square building, the double doors of which stood open, letting out a gush of amber light, through which men moved in and out of the place steadily. Across a single long window the words, "Shoshone Bar," were painted at a slant.

Roswell worked his way through the door. Here was a long rectangle of a room with a bar running the full length of one side of it, where men were jammed shoulder to shoulder and three sweating bartenders tried to keep up with the demanding clamor. The balance of the place was taken up with poker tables, each with men sitting around them while other men, waiting for a chair to empty, milled back and forth.

Clay Roswell wondered where he was going to find Jack Casement in all this jam, if indeed Casement were here. He used the full advantage of his lean height to get his glance around the room, running it along the swarming bar, then out across the little groups seated about the tables. His searching eyes touched a table in a far corner and settled there with a locked abruptness. He rocked up on his toes for a better look, a ripple of feeling touching his face, drawing his jaw taut and bleak. The grey of his eyes turned dark, began to chill.

It couldn't be, he told himself. Luck just wasn't that good to any man. With all the wide wilderness of this West for them to be lost in, it was hardly believable that he'd find the Breens right here in this room. Yet, of the four men sitting around that corner table, there was a shaggy, unkempt burliness about two of them which took him back to a far, lonely night camp along the trail. Roswell began pushing his way through the crush, paying no attention to the profane, half angry protests of the men he elbowed aside.

He broke into a slight clear space beside the table. The four men, engrossed in their talk, paid him no attention. So Roswell, shifting a little to one side, had his good fair look and knew beyond all doubt that he had not been mistaken. The burly pair were the Breens, sure enough. Mitch and Slade Breen!

SOMETHING came up inside Clay Roswell, something cold and bitter and wicked. So many times during the long, thwarted months of the past year he had dreamed of this meeting and had coldly determined what he would do then the time came, if fortune was ever that kind. Well, now the dreamed-of time was here and the Breens were right in front of him. A bleak frenzy gripped him, calling on him to break and smash and destroy.

If he'd had a gun he'd have used it, then and there. But he had no weapon, only his bare hands. Well, that didn't matter, Noth-

ing mattered—odds, weapons, anything. Just so he had the Breens right here and could go to work on them.

Roswell grabbed the back of Mitch Breen's chair, hauled it and the man in it back from the table and spun them around. Mitch Breen stared up, an oath of surprise breaking from his lips.

"What in hell!"

"It's me, Breen," rapped Roswell, thinly wicked. "Now you must remember me?"

Mitch Breen, still in the grip of that surprise which comes before full anger, still staring, cursed again and growled.

"No, I don't remember you. But if you don't quit yankin' this chair and bothering me I'll give you something you'll remember as long as you—"

"Just about a year ago it was, Breen," cut in Roswell. "There was a night camp in Weber Canyon, over past Salt Lake. Sure, you must remember that. Or do you forget all the men you rob and leave for dead? Ah! So you do remember!"

Roswell saw the light of recognition flare up in Mitch Breen's eyes, a look almost of incredulity at first, then fogging quickly to a desperate venom. Mitch came snarling up, throwing warning at his brother.

"Slade—look out!"

That was as far as Mitch Breen got before Clay Roswell's fist crashed into his face. Rolling forward on his toes as he threw it, Roswell put plenty behind that punch. He put a year of brooding, a year of bitter, backed-up longing for elemental justice behind it. It caught Mitch coming up and it hung him floundering and half stunned across the back of his chair. For a moment he stayed there, then, spinning, he slid off the chair and hit the floor heavily. Roswell moved around to follow up.

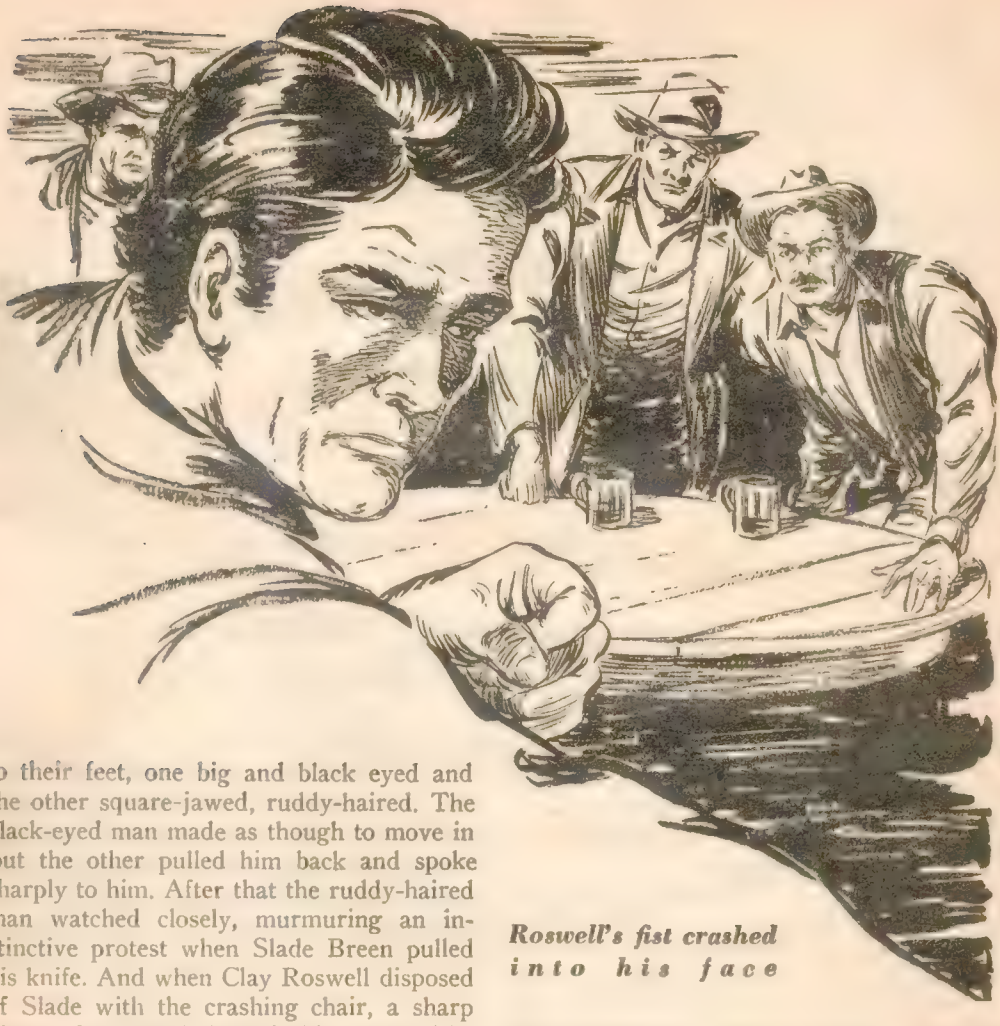
It came near being a fatal move for him. Slade Breen came away from the table with a hard lunge, driving a slashing hand at Roswell. Naked steel gleamed in the yellow lamplight.

Roswell swung out a left arm to ward off the drive of the knife. He managed to keep the steel away from his body, but the burn of its thirsting edge ran hot across his forearm. He slammed his right fist to the side of Slade's head, then whirled into the clear. Carried almost off his feet by the violence of his own lunge and the jarring impact of Roswell's fist, Slade Breen found himself clawing at empty air.

But he recovered quickly and came around, crouched and with feet spread, all set for another deadly lunge. He hunched his shoulders and came in. Roswell, grabbing the chair he'd knocked Mitch Breen out of, swung it high and stepped in to meet Slade and his knife. Roswell brought the chair down with a full-armed sweep.

The impact was savage, the chair splintering across Slade's head and shoulders. The legs of the chair crumpled like matches, but the edge of the seat, solid and wicked, drove viciously home to Slade's head, and he went down soddenly, crumpled and without motion.

WHEN the first blaze of trouble broke, the other two men at the table stayed in their chairs for a moment, startled and still. Then they came



*Roswell's fist crashed into his face*

to their feet, one big and black eyed and the other square-jawed, ruddy-haired. The black-eyed man made as though to move in but the other pulled him back and spoke sharply to him. After that the ruddy-haired man watched closely, murmuring an instinctive protest when Slade Breen pulled his knife. And when Clay Roswell disposed of Slade with the crashing chair, a sharp gleam of approval shone in his eyes and he called a word of warning to Roswell.

"Watch the first one, lad!"

Mitch Breen needed watching. He was back on his feet again and came in with a headlong rush. He smashed into Roswell, grabbed him around the waist and started driving him back in short, stiff-legged, jumping rushes, trying to corner him against the wall.

For a moment Roswell rode with the pressure. Then, suddenly bracing himself, pivoted and beat Mitch off with a clubbing, down-curving blow. Mitch was powerful, but he was clumsy, and Roswell moved lightly around him. Mitch half crouched on spread feet, his arms low and swinging, figens spread to grab and claw. Roswell taunted him.

"Different here than in Weber Canyon, eh, Breen? You caught me in my blankets there, clubbed me, thought you'd caved my head in. Well, try it now!"

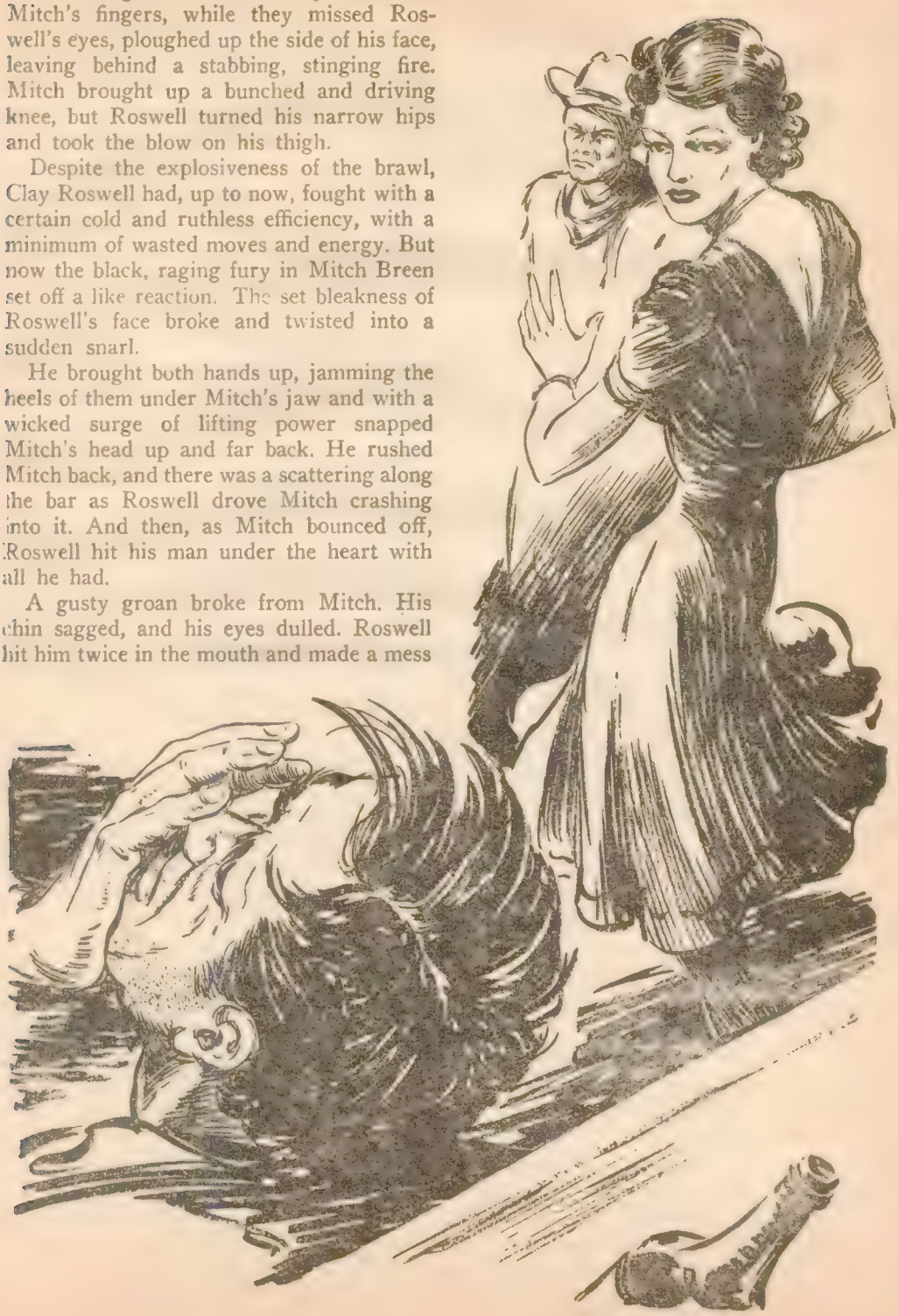
Mitch did, but more warily. He came in, feinting ponderously, and Roswell nailed him under the eye with a straight, lashing punch. Mitch staggered, roared like a maddened animal and charged like one. He got a clawing hand on Roswell and pulled in close. He tried to wrestle Roswell off his feet and, failing in this, tried to stomp down the arches of Roswell's feet. He drove a hand upward, fingers spread and stiff, trying to gouge Roswell's eyes.

Roswell got his head barely clear, but Mitch's fingers, while they missed Roswell's eyes, ploughed up the side of his face, leaving behind a stabbing, stinging fire. Mitch brought up a bunched and driving knee, but Roswell turned his narrow hips and took the blow on his thigh.

Despite the explosiveness of the brawl, Clay Roswell had, up to now, fought with a certain cold and ruthless efficiency, with a minimum of wasted moves and energy. But now the black, raging fury in Mitch Breen set off a like reaction. The set bleakness of Roswell's face broke and twisted into a sudden snarl.

He brought both hands up, jamming the heels of them under Mitch's jaw and with a wicked surge of lifting power snapped Mitch's head up and far back. He rushed Mitch back, and there was a scattering along the bar as Roswell drove Mitch crashing into it. And then, as Mitch bounced off, Roswell hit his man under the heart with all he had.

A gusty groan broke from Mitch. His chin sagged, and his eyes dulled. Roswell hit him twice in the mouth and made a mess



of it. Mitch lurched blindly forward, and Roswell hit him under the heart again. Mitch's knees began to sag, and Roswell pushed him away, then clubbed him squarely on the jaw. Mitch went down and stayed there, helpless.

Roswell shuffled back a couple of steps and stood with spread feet, bent slightly forward at the waist. Breath labored in and out of his lungs, and a raw, harsh saltiness lay in his throat. The pulse of terrific, sustained effort thundered in his ears, and his eyes ached and felt congested.

For a long moment he stared at Mitch, mumbling thickly, as though to himself. "That's only part payment. There'll be more of the same, next time we meet!"

He scrubbed a hand across his eyes, his head lifted, and he came around to face the room of breathless watchers, who accorded a voiceless tribute to a first-class fighting man. No explanation was asked of him, and he offered none. He started for the door, a trifle unsteadily. In the ruckus he'd lost his hat, but someone retrieved it and now handed it to him. This was the ruddy-haired man who'd been sitting at the table with the Breen's.

Not only did the man return Roswell's hat, but he took him by the arm and moved with him to the door. Roswell, still all ajump inside with the fever of combat, would have pulled free, but the man's grip tightened.

"Easy, lad," he said pleasantly. "I'd be your friend. Where that fellow put that knife to your arm you're leaking gore like a wounded buffalo. I'm taking you where something can be done about it."

"Why should you be interested?" demanded Roswell hoarsely. "Who are you?"

"I," was the cheerful answer, "am interested because I like your style, and I like the fight in you. I'm looking for men who can handle themselves like you can. Me, I'm Jack Casement."

THE CABIN stood somewhat apart from the seething center of the town. It glowed with light, and the moment Clay Roswell stepped through the door an atmosphere of comfortable living enfolded him. The air was savory with odors of warm food. From a rear room a clear voice called, "That you, Dad?"

"Right, Kitts," answered Jack Casement. "With a friend. Bring a basin of hot water, some towels and some cloth for a bandage."

Casement dragged up a chair. "Take it easy, lad," he told Roswell. "We'll soon have that arm snugged up."

Roswell dropped into the chair thankfully, amazed how wobbly he felt and knowing a certain impatience with himself because of it. Jack Casement produced a flask. "Take a good drag," he advised. "It'll tie you together."

The liquor took hold immediately, wiping out the hollow gulf which lay under Roswell's short ribs. The dullness which had blunted his sensibilities began to lift. He said, "This is a lot of bother to you."

Casement merely grunted and began peeling back the sleeve of the wounded arm.

Heels tapped briskly, and a girl came in from the rear room, carrying a steaming basin, some towels and cloth. Clay Roswell stirred. This was the same girl he'd tossed out of the way of that rampaging log. He saw her eyes widen.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Why, you're the man who—"

"What's this?" broke in Casement. "You two have met before?"

The girl stammered slightly. "This—this is the man who got me clear of the log that broke Dan Jeffers' leg, Dad. And—and for thanks I started in on him." She broke off, flushing.

Roswell squirmed, from embarrassment as well as from the bite of hot water on the knife wound. "Just happened to be handy," he muttered.

"Well now," said Casement tersely, "they're adding up. The qualifications, I mean."

At this point Katherine took over. Surprisingly deft at this sort of thing, she soon had the wound cleaned and bandaged. "That does it."

"Thanks," Roswell said. "Maybe I better tag myself. The name is Clay Roswell."

Casement nodded. "This is my daughter,

Katherine." He added, twinkling, "She always did have a temper."

The girl flushed again. "Now, Dad."

Came a knock at the cabin door and a call: "Reed Owen, folks."

The door opened, and in stepped the big man with the long jaw and restless black eyes who had been at the table with Casement and the Breens in the Shoshone bar. He looked around with some sharpness.

"Mitch and Slade Breen could have stood a little of this care, Jack. What was the idea of siding against them?"

"Call it personal preference, Reed," answered Casement bluntly. "It was your idea that we hire on the Breens. I was willing to have a talk with them, but from the first I wasn't impressed. Then, after the fireworks, I knew we didn't want them, while I did want this man here. Meet him. Clay Roswell. This is Reed Owen, my supply boss, Roswell. If what I have in mind pans out, you'll be working with him a lot."

Reed Owen gave Roswell a hard stare. "That sounds like you're aiming to offer this fellow a job. What do you know about him, Jack? You never laid eyes on him up to half an hour ago."

"One look is as good as a hundred, providing you see what you want," said Casement cheerfully. "And I did. We'll talk that over at supper. Kitts, set an extra place for Roswell."

ROSWELL stood up. "I went into the Shoshone in the first place hoping to find you, Mr. Casement. Mr. Majors of the Pony Express suggested I see you. He said I might be able to land a job with you. I still want that job. But we can talk it over tomorrow. I've been enough trouble to you for one day."

Casement snorted. "You're staying right here and eating with us. Tomorrow I'll probably have plenty for you to do besides talking. You could still stand a little cleaning up. Go on into the kitchen. Kitts will give you some more hot water."

Roswell hesitated, then shrugged and went into the back room. Katherine Casement filled the basin with fresh water, put it on a bench in the corner. Then she watched while Roswell, working a little awkwardly with only one hand, washed the dust and grime and blood from his face, flinching slightly as he touched the places where Mitch Breen's gouging fingers had scraped. Using the towel the girl handed him, he grinned crookedly.

"You're looking at a horrible example of what can come out of a saloon brawl, Miss Casement."

She surveyed him in grave silence. Her coppery hair glowed thick and rich in the lamplight. She had her father's intense blue eyes and her mouth was softly scarlet above a well formed and decisive chin. Her cheekbones were slightly high, giving to her face a tapered effect. Her skin was flawless, warmly sun-tanned.

"Saloon brawls," she said crisply, "never improved any man. Would you say you were better off for the one you were in?"

Roswell considered gravely, then nodded. "May sound strange to you, but yes—I am better off. I feel that I'm a whole man again. If a man carries a thirst for vengeance long enough without slaking it, he's apt to go sour. He becomes prisoner to his own venom."

She studied him a little more carefully, as though seeing more to him than she'd first perceived. "You don't speak like a barbarian, but your acts suggest a streak of it in you."

"There's a little of the barbarian in most men if you dig deep enough," said Roswell drily.

Now her manner softened slightly. "Of course I do thank you greatly for getting me clear of that log. I'm sorry I was rude. But for a moment I thought—" She broke off, flushing slightly.

"Sure," said Roswell easily, "I know. You thought a wild man from the desert had you." He grinned. "I got to admit you addle a man."

Her flush deepened, and she turned back to the stove.

Jack Casement and Reed Owen came in and took places at the table. Clay Roswell sat across from the girl. The food was

good and plentiful, and there was raw hunger in Roswell. He ate silently, measuring the feeling about the table.

Two things he was quickly aware of. There was no friendliness in Reed Owen toward him. And there was definitely a friendliness between Owen and Katherine Casement, perhaps an even deeper feeling. Owen sat at the girl's left, and there was some air of intimacy in their traded glances and murmured words.

JACK CASEMENT ate with the complete absorption of a hungry man, and his plate was practically clean before he leaned back and bent a shrewd glance on Roswell.

"While you were working on that fellow Mitch Breen, you also laid a few remarks on him. Enough to give a hint as to why you tied into him and his brother. What's the whole story?"

Roswell gave it briefly. "When the word of what the Pony Express intended to do reached Texas, I was hit with the yen to get a job with them, riding express. So I came up across the Strip and into Kansas. Talk there was that the best chance of landing such a job would be out here along the desert stretch. So I got an outfit together and headed this way. I made a camp one night along the trail in Weber Canyon, east of Salt Lake. The Breens were camped there, too. They came over to my fire, named themselves and played up friendly enough, claiming they were a little short of grub. I staked them to a meal. That night, while I was in my blankets, they jumped me and set out to club me to death. They figured they had done a job of it. Then they stole my horses and outfit."

Roswell paused, lifting an unconscious finger to that scar just inside the hair line above his temple. His eyes darkened with the memory of a savage night. Jack Casement stirred restlessly and flashed a sardonic glance at Reed Owen.

"Nice little playmates, the Breens. Go on, lad."

"Not much else," continued Clay Roswell. "An emigrant party coming through found me and carried me with them as far as Salt Lake, where they left me in the care of the Mormons. I guess it was touch and go for a time, but those good people pulled me through."

"I was with them all the rest of the summer, the fall and winter. Come spring again I started working my way west again, doing odd jobs at the Pony Express stations along the trail for my food and a bed. It was a good life. It gave me back my full health. I hardly dreamed of running across the Breens here in Ft. Churchill within an hour after I arrived. But when I did, when I saw them there in the Shoshone, well, something just seemed to explode in me and I went after them. That's the story."

Jack Casement flashed another glance at Reed Owen. "Now what do you think of my judgment of men, Reed? You were sold on a pair of damned thieves. I like my choice better."

Reed Owen shrugged. "You've heard Roswell's story. Maybe the Breens could tell another one."

"Not to me," declared Casement. "I like this one. It rings with truth. Clay Roswell, how'd you like to be my wagon boss?"

Reed Owen jerked forward in his chair. "Wagon boss! Oh, come on now, Jack. Be serious. It's one thing to offer Roswell a job of sorts. But wagon boss, that's something else. What do you really know about this fellow?"

"You asked me that before and I told you," cut in Casement. "I got a feeling about this thing. I think it's good. How about it, lad?"

Clay Roswell was a trifle dazed. Things were moving pretty fast. "That's a big order, Mr. Casement. I'd be happy to work for you at any job, of course. But there's a lot I don't know about wagons."

"Not afraid to tackle it, are you?" Casement was leaning forward now, the easy humor gone. His face was hard, and the blaze in his blue eyes a penetrating flame.

Clay Roswell met his glance fully. "No," he answered quietly. "I'm not afraid to tackle it. And I'll give you my best."

"Fine! You don't have to know much about the actual handling of wagons. Any

plug teamster knows how to load and drive a wagon, how to take care of it and his team. But I want a man who can organize, who can handle men, who can visualize not one wagon but a hundred of them, who can schedule their movements with a minimum of lost motion and time. I've been on the hunt for such a wagon boss for weeks. For a man young enough to have daring and enthusiasm, yet old enough to know judgement and balance. For a man I can trust implicitly and who can be plenty tough when he has to. And I say now that I've found him. Shall we shake on it, lad?"

Clay Roswell drew a deep breath. "I never went back on my hire in my life, and I never will. Here's my hand on it, sir!"

Casement's hand came swiftly across the table, and Casement's easy humor returned. "Now I want to get down and see how Dan Jeffers is making out, and I'll want to introduce you around. Think that arm will let you stand up to a busy evening?"

"Of course. Whatever you say, Mr. Casement."

They stood up to leave. Reed Owen remained in his chair, slouched deep, a look not far from sulkiness on his face. Clay Roswell looked past him at Katherine Casement.

"My thanks for everything, Miss Casement. You've been very kind."

She met his glance and gave him a small, grave nod which left him wondering whether it reflected approval or disapproval. And as suddenly as a strong, keen wind striking out of nowhere, it came to Clay Roswell that it mattered a great deal what this copper-haired daughter of Jack Casement's thought of him

THE NEXT few days were the busiest Clay Roswell had ever known. There were endless details to be grasped, absorbed and translated into action. Jack Casement had said, "The jump-off depends on when we can get our wagons organized and ready to roll, Clay. When you say you're ready, we start into the desert."

So Roswell drove himself mercilessly, even though his wounded arm left him feeling a trifle seedy for a day or two. He had one stroke of tremendous luck. He bumped into Bill Yerkes, the grizzled teamster he'd ridden in with from the desert. Bill had a split lip, a black eye, and a look of supreme satisfaction.

Roswell grinned. "Who was the other fellow, Bill?"

Bill spat. "Bucko Yoland, the dirty scut! Alex Major's wagon boss. He's had it in for me for a long time, but he never dared get too nasty while Alex Majors was around. But Alex left yesterday for an inspection trip across the desert, so Yoland took the opportunity to start rawhiding me around. Now I'm a man who can take a cussin' out when I got it coming. But no man can blackguard me unfairly. I proved that to Mr. Bucko Yoland the hard way." Bill rolled a cud of blackstrap carefully across a bruised mouth and spat again.

"All of which means that right now you're probably out of a job," said Roswell. "I hope so."

***She soon had the wound bandaged***

Bill Yerkes cocked his grizzled head. "And why do you hope so?"

"Because I need a good man to help me handle Jack Casements wagons. How about it, Bill? As my segundo?"

"You tempt me, boy, you surely do," said Bill. Then he grinned sheepishly. "Ah, I wouldn't try and fool you. I was out to

look you up and see if you could use me. Heard that Casement had made you wagon boss. So now you've hired yourself a lazy old mule skinner. Where do you want me to start?"

Bill Yerkes proved to be invaluable. He knew the wagon trade from the ground up. He knew mules and the men who drove them. He had a wide circle of friends among those of his trade, and with him advising here and suggesting there, Roswell was able to report all in readiness to Jack Casement far quicker than he'd dared hope.

LIKE Alex Majors of the Pony Express, Jack Casement had an office in a corner of a big warehouse. Stored in the warehouse and stacked all about the place were mountains of supplies. The gathering and replenishing of these was Reed Owen's job. He ran it with a heavy but efficient hand. He was in Casement's office when Roswell went in to report, and he turned to Roswell curtly.

"I got my end of the job well in hand, Roswell. The supplies are ready and waiting. When will you have the wagons ready to haul it? Good days are slipping away from us."

Roswell eyed him levelly, wondering at the obvious dislike and antagonism this man showed toward him. He gave back curtness for curtness.

"The wagons are ready now."

Reed Owen's lip curled. "I don't mean just a few wagons. I mean all of them."

"That's what I mean," shot back Roswell. "All of them. Ready to roll the minute Mr. Casement gives the word."

Jack Casement, listening at his desk, lifted a triumphant eyebrow at Reed Owen. "Now didn't I tell you that you were yelling before you were hurt, Reed? Lad, that's good work!"

Katherine Casement was sitting at her father's elbow, helping him wade through a mountain of paper work. Roswell was conscious of her guarded glance. He had drawn an advance against his first month's wages and had outfitted himself with new clothes from head to foot, and he had the satisfaction of knowing he could face this girl now without the uncomfortable feeling that he was just a short jump above a rag picker. Besides the new clothes there was a Dragoon revolver, holstered at his lean hips. At this Reed Owen directed a sarcastic remark.

"That gun must weigh you down, Roswell. Didn't know the camp had grown that wild."

"Next time I might not have a saloon chair handy," drawled Roswell. "And it won't be long before we're out in the desert."

"With an army of men," scoffed Owen.

Roswell shrugged. "Big place, the desert. Lots more to it than meets the eye." He turned to Casement. "When will you want the wagons brought up for loading?"

"Why now, if you're ready, we ought to be," said Casement. "We'll load this afternoon and jump off tomorrow at dawn. Kitts, you and I'll have to scratch to get this cussed paper work done. Reed, get your warehouse gang organized for a heavy afternoon."

Loading began right after midday. Outfit after outfit pulled in at the supply yards and warehouse. Men sweated, swore and toiled mightily, and as soon as one loaded outfit creaked ponderously off, there was always an empty one to move into its place.

At mid-afternoon Clay Roswell found himself down at the pole yard where men with pike pole and peavy, rope and tackle, and plain brute strength rolled and skidded and fought logs into position on the pole wagons. And now it was Bill Yerkes who came hurrying up, eyes glinting angrily under bushy brows.

"Better get back over to the warehouse," said Bill gruffly. "Trouble there."

Clay swung around. "What kind of trouble, Bill?"

"That feller Owen. Who in hell does he think he is, anyhow? How much say has he got over us wagon men?"

"None that I know of," said Clay. "What's the matter?"

"Well, he was out to way overload Skip Keswick's wagon with flour, and when Skip set to argue with him about it, Owen hauled off and knocked Skip down, with Skip

hardly more'n half his size. So now Skip is ready to quit and some of the other boys who saw the fracas about to do the same. It's an idea that could grow. The time to stop that sort of thing is right now!"

"Right you are!" rapped Clay. "Come on!"

Things had come to a dead halt at the loading platform of the warehouse. A wagon stood beside the platform stacked high with barreled flour. At a glance, Clay Roswell could see that it was loaded beyond all reasonable capacity. Some empty wagons stood further back, with an uneasy group of skinners standing by. With them was a wiry little man, mopping at a bleeding mouth with a faded bandanna handkerchief. The group eyed Clay uneasily as he came up to them.

To the wiry little man Bill Yerkes said, "Tell it again, Skip."

SKIP KESWICK told it, a hard anger in his voice. "That's my outfit yonder. It's way overloaded for the kind of going that's out ahead. Trying to buck the desert with that load would be just asking for a breakdown at the first rough going. Besides which, it'd kill off a string of mules inside of ten miles."

The little teamster dabbed at his mouth again and went on, "All of which I tried to tell that Owen hombre. He told me to shut up and get out of the way, that he was runnin' the loadin' job. I set to argue with him some more, and he hauls off an' knocks me down. Now if that's the way this deal is goin' to be run, Jack Casement can have his damned job. I'm going to quit you, Roswell!"

Clay dropped a hand on the little man's shoulder. "No you're not, Skip. You wait right here. I'm having a little talk with Mr. Reed Owen!"

As Clay headed over to the warehouse, Reed Owen and Katherine Casement came out on the platform. Reed Owen shot scowling words at Clay.

"Thought you claimed to have your wagon men in hand, Roswell? This don't look like it. Get that wagon out of there and make room for another. Me and my men are anxious to get on with the chore."

Clay put a hand on the platform, vaulted up onto it. He straightened and moved in on Owen, stopping a short stride away, boring at Owen with grey eyes that had gone dark and chill.

"Something I'm going to tell you just once, Owen," he said harshly. "Just once —so don't forget it. Don't you ever hit one of my men again! You ought to be proud of yourself, taking a swing at little Skip Keswick. You got any complaint to make against one of my men, you come to me. Do I make myself clear?"

Reed Owen rolled up on his toes. "You can have some of the same if you want it."

This was as far as Owen got before Katherine Casement stepped between the pair of them, facing Clay.

"Stop it, both of you!" she cried. Then to Clay, "There's a very great deal still to be loaded. And until that wagon is moved out we can't do a thing. You will see that it is moved, immediately."

"Miss Casement, that wagon will be moved when the load has been cut down to a sane limit, with Skip Keswick, whose job it will be to drive the outfit, saying what the load limit will be." Clay's tone was as crisp as her own. "Where's your father?"

Her chin came up, her eyes flashing. "Does that matter? But if you must know, he's out in the desert somewhere. Mr. Hughes, of the survey gang, sent for him. Dad said it might be dark before he got back, and he wanted to find everything ready to roll. Satisfied?"

"Not entirely. I wish he was here." Clay looked past her at Reed Owen. "Cut that load down to size, Owen, or that wagon stays right there."

"Hell with you!" blurted Owen. "I've loaded plenty of wagons in my time. I know how much an outfit can carry. But a damn lazy skinner would rather ride a light load than a heavy one. Easier for him. I'm telling you, Roswell, get somebody to move that wagon!"

"Not until the load is cut down to what it should be," returned Clay flatly. "That stands, Owen!"

KATHERINE CASEMENT stamped an angry foot. "This is ridiculous! We're wasting valuable time. Can't you understand, Clay Roswell, that Reed is responsible for moving our supplies? Can't—"

"And I'm responsible for the wagons that carry those supplies," broke in Clay. "A broken-down wagon or a worked-out string of mules is my problem, not Owen's. As far as time is concerned, it's better to waste a little here than a great deal out in the desert where a breakdown can be mighty serious." He turned, waved and called. "Bill Yerkes, come here!"

Bill left the group of skinners and came over to them.

"Bill," said Clay, "you've been running freight outfits all your life. Will you please tell Miss Casement your opinion?"

Bill Yerkes touched his hat as he looked at the girl.

"Miss," he said, "I'm giving you the truth. That wagon is overloaded by a full ton. I know what the desert is. I've been hauling across it steady for the Pony Express for the past year. Packing that load, the wagon wouldn't last ten miles in the desert. And that's the simple fact of it."

There was no guile in Bill Yerkes, but there was a rugged simplicity which the girl could not ignore. She nibbled at a red underlip and then shrugged.

"Very well. You should know what you're talking about. Reed, have your men cut the load down to what the teamsters think is right." With that she turned and went into her father's office.

This was gall and wormwood to Reed Owen. He flushed with dark anger. He stared after Katherine Casement, then brought his fuming black eyes back to Clay Roswell, who smiled grimly.

"You've had your orders, Owen. And once more this warning. Don't use your fists on one of my men again. Try them on me!"

Owen let out a low, furious curse. "That will probably come, Roswell."

Clay nodded easily. "Beginning to think so myself. But right now the job to do is get that load down to size."

Grey eyes locked with black ones, and the black ones turned away. Reed Owen yelled harshly to his warehouse hands, and barrels of flour began coming down off Skip Keswick's wagon. Clay Roswell called the little teamster over.

"This better, Skip?"

Skip, moving with a little swagger, nodded. "I'll haul my share, any time, any

***Coppery hair glowed in the lamplight***

place. But I don't break down my wagon or kill off my team for any man. Obliged, boss."

Reed Owen turned and stamped into the vast gloom of the warehouse. Clay Roswell hesitated a moment, then went into Jack Casement's office. Katherine Casement was at the desk, busy over a mound of paper work. Her coppery head came up with an antagonistic tilt.

"You should be supremely satisfied," she charged. "You won your point."

"Wasn't even thinking about that," said Clay evenly. "I just wanted to tell you I was sorry there had to be a fuss and to

thank you for seeing the side of the wagon men."

"One side or the other had to concede the point, and there was a stubborn, pig-headed look about you which told me you never would. So!" She shrugged slim shoulders.

Clay grinned. "Wonder if it'll always be that way?"

She eyed him a trifle warily. "I don't know what you mean."

"My motives, and the way you misunderstand them."

"I can't stand stubborn, pig-headed men." she flamed.

"Can't blame you there," drawled Clay. "Don't like the brutes myself. But anyhow —thanks!"

He touched his hat and left.

Katherine Casement watched him go, a tall, solid-shouldered man who moved with a light, sure ease. There was, she realized, a boyish humor in this man, but there was also a hard, tough maturity which leaped from his grey eyes when they darkened and turned cold.

Twice had she seen that look show. The first time had been just the briefest flash, before humor wiped it out, after the episode of the rolling log. The second had been just a few moments ago, when he'd faced Reed Owen out on the warehouse platform. She weighed the judgement her father had shown in picking Clay Roswell as his wagon boss, and had to admit that in one thing at least her father was right. Fully aroused, Clay Roswell could be a wicked fighting man.

WITH the atmosphere cleared, things moved along rapidly at the warehouse. Wagons rumbled up, were loaded, rumbled away. Katherine Casement was able to get well on with her paper work. Then it was Reed Owen who came in and dropped into a chair.

"Sorry, Kitts," he said. "Guess I was kind of rough out there. But that fellow Roswell gets under my skin. I don't like the way he throws his weight around. Wish I felt as sure of him as your father does."

The girl eyed him with a severity she did not altogether feel. She liked Reed Owen a lot. They had been thrown much together since they'd first met a year ago over in Sacramento, across the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west. That was when her father had been selected by the telegraph company to be in charge of the desert end of construction of the proposed line between Ft. Churchill and Salt Lake.

Reed Owen, she realized, had his faults. But what man was without them? There was a rough streak in him when his temper flared. He was restless and aggressive and could be overswift in his judgement at times. But there was also a broad streak of charm in the man when he wanted to turn it on.

"There's no accounting for likes and dislikes, Reed," she said. "Some men seem fated to clash. Perhaps that's the way it is with you and Clay Roswell. But for the good of everyone I hope you'll try and avoid any more arguments. After all, Clay Roswell is Dad's man and one of the team."

"I know," Owen admitted. "But for some reason he sure sets my roach up. Just so you're not mad at me, I'll try and get along with the devil himself."

She smiled. "Sometimes grown men can be ridiculously like pugnacious small boys, Reed. Now there's work to do. Let's get at it!"

The afternoon wore along and ran out. The sun dipped from sight beyond the distant blue rampart of the world that was the Sierras. At the military post the bugles sang and the flag floated earthward. Ft. Churchill, the town, seethed and rumbled and smoked with dust.

Clay Roswell and Bill Yerkes moved about among the loaded wagons drawn up in orderly lines, all set for the charge into the desert at the morrow's dawn. Clay wondered aloud if it would be wise to put a guard on the wagons for the night.

"I say yes!" declared Bill Yerkes emphatically. "Some things are in mighty short supply on this side of the mountains, grub in particular. Like flour. Mebbe it ain't exactly worth its weight in gold, but it's scarce enough and costs enough to make it worth any man's trouble to hoist a couple

of barrels, should he be that breed of maverick and get a chance at it."

"I'll stand a shift myself," said Clay.

"No you won't. Some jobs the boss don't do. You leave this to me, boy. I'll pick a couple of good men."

Yerkes hurried away to tend to this angle, and Clay, realizing that after the jump-off it could be weeks, maybe months before he'd have the chance again, headed for one of the town's supply posts to pick up a few more items of personal gear.

IN THE trading post a gaunt emigrant man was dickering with a clerk. "Your prices are pretty steep, but not too much out of line, all things considered. It's them damn little posts along the trail that rob a man. Me and the old lady and the kids come on in from Myers Wells on damn short rations, rather than pay the robber prices they're askin' there."

The clerk shrugged. "You better stock up plenty before startin' over the mountains, friend. If you think they're tough at Myers Wells, just try them at Sugar Pine or Bear Wallow. Prices there will make you really scream."

By the time Clay Roswell had bought what he wanted and got back on the streets again, it was full dark, with lights winking yellow through the dust. Two men moved into a pool of light on the far side of the street. Recognition was instant with Clay. The Breens—Mitch and Slade! The old, cold fury rushed up in Clay again, urging him to go after them. He'd manhandled them once, but that was only part of the payoff.

Another man joined the Breens, a big man. Reed Owen. The three of them moved on out of the light and were swallowed up in the dark, shifting mass of the crowd. Clay stood quietly for a long minute in frowning thought before going along, heading for the rude boarding house where he'd been staying.

An hour later he knocked at the door of the Casement cabin, then stepped in at Casement's yelled summons. Casement was at the supper table, just in from his trip into the desert. Also at the table were Katherine Casement and Reed Owen.

"Pull up a chair and dig in, Clay," invited Casement. "How are those wagons?"

"Loaded and set to roll," answered Clay. "Thanks, but I've had supper. Just dropped in to see if there was any final instruction."

"No change. We roll at dawn." Casement smiled. "Pawing the ground to get going, eh, lad?"

"Be good to get at the main job," Clay admitted. "See you in the morning, sir."

Moving to the door, Clay met the glances of Katherine Casement and Reed Owen. The girl's was unreadable, but the same old antagonism flared up at once in Owen's eyes.

From the Casement cabin, Clay made a final circle through the wagon park. From the black shadow of a towering freighter, Bill Yerkes' voice reached. "All quiet, Clay."

Clay went over there, hunkered down against a high wheel, loaded his pipe. Here the night was still, but over to the west the voice of the town was a solid rumble, broken now and then by a high, wild yell as some exuberant spirit let loose an excess of energy.

"Be glad to get shut of this place," growled Yerkes. "When a man's been used to the quiet camps of the desert, all this racket and rush gets on his nerves."

"You," complained Clay, "wouldn't let me stand a guard shift, yet you take one yourself."

Bill Yerkes grunted cheerfully. "I'm a night hawk by preference. I like to sit and watch the stars. Brad Lincoln will be out to spell me at midnight."

Clay smoked out his pipe, then headed for his room and turned in, completely weary but able to sleep only fitfully. He was up again in the final black hour before dawn, to breakfast at an eating house which catered to the teamsters who were early out of this town and late into it.

At the wagon yards things were electric with a mighty stir. Sleepy, growling voices in the dark, the clank of harness and trace, the stamp and shuffle of mule teams being led into place. Dust, invisible in the dark, rose to bite the nostrils. Morning's chill

was in the air. In the eastern heavens a greyness began to form and grow.

Clay Roswell, working a way through the dark tangle, heard a teamster swear in harsh surprise, then call a warning to one of his fellows. "What the devil! Hey, Pike, careful with those mules. There's a damn drunk layin' here, dead to the world. Nearly led my team right over him."

"Shake him awake and get him out of there," came the answer. "Somebody will run over him, sure, once we start to roll. Wait, I'll give you a hand."

There was a moment of grunting effort, then: "Don't smell no likker on him. And he ain't limp—he's stiff. Hey, this man ain't drunk—he's dead!"

Gusty consternation broke. "Hey, Roswell, Clay Roswell! Or Bill Yerkes! Pass the call for Roswell or Yerkes. Trouble over here!"

Clay hurried to the spot, and a moment later Bill Yerkes came panting up.

A match flared, throwing into harsh outline grim and wondering faces. It showed something else. It showed a husky young teamster sprawled there, his hair matted with blood and dust.

"Brad Lincoln!" exclaimed Bill Yerkes harshly. "He's been clubbed to death!"

Before further words could be spoken, another yell lifted, up at the head of the line. "Who moved my wagon? Where's my wagon?"

"There could be the answer to this dirty business," growled Yerkes. "Come on, Clay!"

They found Skip Keswick stamping around and swearing in bewilderment.

"What kind of crazy business is this?" Skip was demanding. "I left my wagon lined up right here. Now it's gone!"

*(To be continued in the next issue)*

# KNOW YOUR WEST

**1. Each year at Christmas time the little cowtown of Anson, Texas, commemorates with an old-time costume dance the writing of the famous poem *Cowboys' Christmas Ball*, in 1885, by a poet whose first name was Larry. What was his last name?**

**2. Fill in the blanks with kinds of trees popular as Christmas trees in much of the West: Colorado blue ....., white or balsam....., Douglas ....., piñon ....., silver.....**

**3. One year the Running W cowboys enjoyed their *Feliz Navidad* with a Christmas tree at the *casa grande*, followed by a heap big *baile*. And what does all that mean?**

**4. Gifts on the tree included a pair of Lee Riders for Shorty. What were they?**

**5. Smoky had bought the schoolmarm a fine Zuñi bracelet—which tells you what metal it was made of and what stones were its settings.**

**6. It was plain that Smoky had the inside track with the blonde schoolmarm, judging by the 3X silver belly laloo she put on the tree for him. You name it.**

**7. The Kansas Kid's present from his pa and ma was a brand new pair of cowhide brushbeaters, more commonly called.....?**

**8. Spike claimed that the Big Auger's present to each cowhand was really more of a present for the horse. Made with 17 strands, 8-ply mohair, two rings, a red diamond design in the middle—what was it?**

**9. Most admired of all were Slim's Crockett petmakers. You name 'em.**

**10. So a Merry Christmas and a *Feliz Año Nuevo* from the New Mexico cow country to you all!**

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

**You will find the answers to these questions on page 133. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

# DESERT AMBUSH

## By Joel Matthews

***WHEN A MAN can't get a preying woman out of his head, is he foolish or wiser than he thinks?***

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SAM BLADE let the big gelding pick his way down the graveled road leading toward the Gila bend. Sam was a big man in his early thirties, broad-shouldered and deep-chested, with a wild mane of black hair that flowed down his powerful neck to his buckskin shirt. Outlined against the moon the way he was, he knew he made an irresistible target for any lurking Apache. But he didn't give a damn. He was brooding about a woman.

A very handsome woman she was, too, who went by the name of Kate Rohanne. Come to think of it, she was more than handsome with the red-gold hair, the eyes of grey fire and the generous curves that even now made him suck in his breath. When a man's been trail-pounding without a letup for two months, it's bad to think of a woman like that, knowing all the time you can't have her and even might have to kill her. . . .

He pushed the thought of her aside and looked around. The moon shimmered across the Arizona sands, and through the tangle of silvery mesquite he could see the shack of the shepherd, Gonzalez. The door was open, and light from the fireplace was pouring out. *Funny about the shepherd,* thought Sam, *always keeps the door open. Don't seem to be scared of the Apaches like most Mexicans.*

Sam dismounted at the clearing, hobbled the gelding and strode toward the adobe hut. Gonzalez stood in the doorway, a slight figure in a frayed shirt of flour sacking and ragged peon pants held up around his thin waist by knotted cord. The shepherd silently nodded his welcome. His jet eyes, sharp and observant, fell to Sam's dust-caked boots.

"You have come far this time, *Señor* Blade," he remarked courteously and bowed Sam into his dwelling. The big man racked his carbine on the wall pegs and nodded wearily.

"Today from the Santa Catalinas," he replied in Spanish. "Yesterday from the Galluros and the day before that from the Pinaleños."

Sam stopped before the packing crate that served as the shepherd's table, sniffing hungrily at the smoking chunks of meat on an eathenware plate.

"Smells good," he said. "What is it, *pastor*?"

"Meat of the horse," the shepherd replied. "Have some, *señor*. It is a great delicacy."

Sam thought of his gelding. "Just ate," he lied quickly.

WHEN the shepherd had finished eating, he threw a faded red serape about his shoulders and sat cross-legged before the fireplace. Sam squatted beside him and shot a curious glance at Gonzalez. The light from the piñon embers glimmered over his lean, dark-skinned features. Sam always had thought of him as a simple soul, courteous and not given to talk; yet he had a quiet dignity that belied his tattered garments. He had known Gonzalez for some months, and the shepherd

*A shot rang out, and he lost consciousness*

had always come up with bits of useful information on what was going on in the territory.

"Anything new, Gonzalez?" Sam asked casually.

"*Nada,*" replied the shepherd, hunching his shoulders. "And with you, *Señor* Blade. You have found something, no?"

"No," said Sam ruefully. "I have traveled far and wide. And I have crossed the trail of el Maldito, the Accursed One, at the Gila, the Hassayampa, the San Pedro and the Salt. He is all over, that renegade. And from the sign, his Apache band now numbers a hundred or more. But of those who give him the guns, there is no sign."

Gonzalez offered him a small, deerskin pouch and some cigarette paper. Sam sniffed at the tobacco. The sun-cured Sonora was mixed with the ground bark of the red willow. He took a pinch, crushed the brittle leaves between his palms and rolled it into the paper. Gonzalez held up a lighted twig.

"And you did not trail el Maldito?" asked the shepherd.

"No, *pastor.* That is not my mission. I am a scout. I look merely for those who run guns to the Apaches. Besides," he added, gesturing to the shadows on the wall, "can one trap a shadow?"

Gonzalez moistened the tip of his ciga-

rette with his tongue. "The words of the young scout are wise beyond his years," he murmured.

"*Gracias,* Gonzalez," said Sam. "But tell me, *pastor,* what do you hear from Painted Rock?"

The shepherd hesitated. "Nothing—except that *Señor* Flood is back."

Sam's lips tightened. He waited for the shepherd to go on, but Gonzalez was in no hurry. Slowly, he puffed on his cigarette and kept his gaze on the fire. Finally, he turned to Sam:

"He is a bad *gringo,* this *Señor* Flood. Did you not chase him out of Painted Rock?"

"*Si,*" replied Sam. "Right after Hawk Davis was killed."

Sam remembered the incident and squirmed. He found himself thinking he was almost glad Hawk was dead. Now he could get the woman for himself. The scout caught himself up short. That was a hell of a way to feel about a friend whose death he had sworn to avenge.

NOT THAT he and Hawk had been friendly from the start. Far from it. Sam had been the first to hire up as a scout for the army at Camp Grant. And he'd been a little riled when General Crook had hired Hawk some few weeks later as a companion scout. That was because Hawk was a Johnny Reb from the Panhandle with a chip on his shoulder and a potent dislike for the Damyank bluebellies—present company excepted, as Hawk always used to say. But underneath Hawk's truculent arrogance was a warm and generous nature that soon thawed Sam's bias against Texans. It wasn't long before the two had formed a close friendship, sharing their mess and money and even their thoughts.

Then came the day about six months ago when the general detached them from active duty to send them out to track down the smugglers who were running guns to el Maldito. All signs pointed to Jim Flood, supply merchant for the Army in Arizona and owner of Painted Rock's biggest saloon.

Flood was the acknowledged leader of the Ring, a closed circle of respectable Painted Rock citizens who sold low-grade goods to the Quartermaster's Corps at high-grade prices. The recent peace signed with the Apaches threatened their business with ruin. To keep the Apaches on the warpath, Flood staged several raids on white ranches and blamed the incidents on the Injuns. The outraged ranchers wrought swift and cruel vengeance on unarmed villages of the Chiricahua Apaches. The outraged Chiricahuas wanted to retaliate. Flood gladly supplied them the weapons.

Not that there was any proof of Flood's gun-running. Flood and the Ring covered their tracks well. But it wasn't long before Hawk had picked up a clew. He followed the trail right to the door of the Morgue, Flood's saloon. The next day Hawk's body, riddled with bullets, was found in the street. When Sam found out, he went gunning for Flood. But the merchant, in haste and prudence, skipped town for a business trip back East. . . .

Gonzalez broke in on Sam's thoughts:

"You think, *Señor* Blade, that your *amigo,* he was killed by this Flood?"

"Sure of it," Sam said. "Flood and his snakes. Maybe the woman, too.

He stirred uneasily at the thought of Kate Rohanne. She had worked as a singer in the Morgue. Hawk had met her there. He had fallen in love with her, and, to hear the Texan say it, she with him. Then Hawk had been murdered.

"The woman, what have she to do with it?" prodded Gonzalez.

"Plenty," said Sam grimly. "Before she met Hawk, she was known as Flood's woman. Flood sure is a proud hombre. Yet he didn't seem to mind her romancing with Hawk. Stands to reason he was using her to find out if Hawk was getting too close to knowing who was running guns to the Apaches."

Sam rose and stretched. "Ho, Gonzalez, I'll be going to Painted Rock now. If you hear of anything, get in touch with Old Ephraim, the prospector. Know him?"

"*Si,*" was the shepherd's prompt response. "I know well the aged greybeard

who hunts always for the gold he never finds."

Sam raised a hand in salute and was out in the desert night.

AS THE gelding topped the hill overlooking the fork in the road, Sam spied a small caravan of freight wagons, perhaps five in all, rolling northward toward Prescott. The broad, iron-shod wheels of the lumbering *carretas* rasped on gritted axles, and the air was alive with the crack of blacksnake whips as the skinners wheeled their mules around the bend.

Sam frowned. He wondered why there were no guards seated alongside the skinners. As far as he could see, there were only three horsemen escorting the wagon train. Come daylight and this particular outfit would be easy pickings for the Apaches.

Unless, of course, they were gun-runners, thought Sam. He gave the gelding a smart slap on the rump and had covered half the distance when two of the horsemen loomed up in the moonlight, blocking his path. The third, who sat heavy in the saddle, lingered behind.

The rider nearest him struck up a light. A squat man with runted legs that barely reached the stirrups, he looked at Sam with mean, hostile eyes.

"What you want, stranger?" he demanded truculently. His shotgun rested on the pommel, its nose pointed at Sam's ribs.

"Just looking," replied Sam.

The rider gestured with the shotgun. "Well, you've had your look. Get going."

Sam inched his right hand down to the Colt at his hip.

"Hear tell it's a free country," he said mildly. "Reckon I'll hang around for a spell."

The squat man turned to his companion. "Get that, Poker-Face? Says it's a free country. Maybe we oughta fix it up so's he can get some free land on Boot Hill."

The man called Poker-Face, tall and cadaverously thin, with two guns dangling from his hips, laughed.

"We've got him boxed, Cyclone," he drawled. "Measure him for wings."

Cyclone gripped his weapon like a club. "Appears like you're having your last look, mister," he snarled and swung the weapon. Sam ducked, roweled his gelding and yanked Cyclone by the leg. The runted man somersaulted into the air and landed on his back, the breath knocked out of him.

Poker-Face cursed. He slapped his hand to a holster. Sam's fingers streaked to his Colt. The two guns roared, almost simultaneously, and it was over in a flash.

"Gawd!" cried one of the skinners. "He got Poker-Face!"

The third horseman galloped up to the scene. But when he saw Poker-Face swaying in the saddle, clutching at his wounded shoulder, he reined up short and raised his hands.

Sam nodded approvingly. "That's right, mister," he said quietly. "Just keep 'em high and you'll stay out of trouble."

The heavy man chuckled.

"Seems I'm always running into trouble when I run into you, Mr. Blade."

The scout recognized the deep, honeyed voice of Jim Flood. The merchant stood directly in the moonglow, his brown bowler perched cockily over an ear. Flood was short-necked and heavy-set with a paunchy middle that tended to bulge over his belt. His tiny, button-bright eyes, peering out of enormously fat jowls, glinted craftily as he spoke:

"It also seems that you've become quite fast on the draw, Mr. Blade."

"Yup," agreed Sam. "Hawk Davis, he gave me a few pointers. My, but he was fast, Hawk was."

"Ah," said Flood, "but not fast enough," and there was the faintest hint of menace in his purr.

Sam surveyed the heavy man for an instant, and his answer was soft: "Hawk were quick enough, mister. Just happened that he didn't have eyes in the back of his head."

FLOOD greeted the sally with studied laughter and a frozen grimace that passed for a smile. Sam pointed his gun at the freight wagons.

"Them your *carretas*?"

The merchant nodded.

"What you got in 'em?"

"Why don't you go see?" taunted the merchant.

"Not a bad idea," said Sam. Dismounting, he waved his Colt at the merchant and his hired men. "Just mosey up along front where I can keep an eye on you."

It was a tedious job, but Sam inspected each of the deep-bellied wagons with grim thoroughness, from the linchpin hubs to the flaring ribs supporting the taut canvas tops. He even rummaged through the tar buckets hanging in the back. His poking around in the contents was even more discouraging. All he found were the usual trade goods of the frontier—bolts of calico and muslin, barrels of flour, sacks of sugar and coffee, kegs of nails, blankets and pot-bellied stoves.

Flood watched with passive amusement until Sam ordered a skinner to crack open the water casks with a peavy. The very notion ruffled the merchant's composure.

"This is an unwarranted destruction of property," he growled. "The general will hear of this."

"Well," said Sam imperturbably, "you could tell him I just thought you might be carrying whiskey in them their casks for them Apache friends of yours."

When the job was finished, Sam signalled the skinners to go on. Strange, he thought as he watched the *carretas* disappear into the darkness, the wagons seemed low-slung. Nothing especially wrong in that, though, and he wondered where Flood had hidden the guns. Probably had them cached out in the hills. But anyway, he wouldn't be able to deliver them tonight, if that was his intention. Sam had seen to that when he had had the water casks cracked open. . . .

BACK in Painted Rock Sam stabled his horse, had a meal in a hotel and strolled into the Morgue, largest of the desert town's two dozen saloons. The huge, barn-like structure, flooded with light from its battery of coal oil lamps, was crowded with awed greenhorns, strapping buffalo hunters, callous-handed skinners, sober tradesmen in pancake hats, señoritas with flashing smiles and buckled shoes, gaunt prospectors and Papagoes.

As Sam stepped up to the bar and ordered a drink, a slender man in a green eyeshade and gaitered shirt sleeves rose from his slot behind the faro table and sauntered over to him. It was the Creole, Caradoc, suave and sharp-fingered card dealer and ex-proprietor of the Morgue.

"I have a message for you, Blade," the Creole started to say, but stopped suddenly when he saw Flood and his two companions entering by the rear door. The heavy man looked up and smiled urbanely at Sam. Cyclone scowled. Poker-Face, his face averted, was adjusting his arm in a sling. The trio disappeared into a room under the stairway.

"Your boss sure looks mad," Sam remarked to the Creole.

"But he's not my boss—"

Sam interrupted curtly: "Quit flapping air, Caradoc. Everyone hereabouts knows he bought the Morgue from you and that he's keeping you on as front man. By the way, who's the two fellers with him?"

"The one with the short legs is Skelly, Cyclone Skelly. The other is Poker-Face Queen." Caradoc's eyes grew thoughtful. "Wonder what happened to Queen?"

"Maybe he got in a shooting scrape," suggested Sam helpfully.

The Creole's laugh was scornful. "If he had, more likely the other fellow would be wearing the sling. Queen's the fastest man in the Territory with a gun. But, anyway, what I came to tell you about is that Kate wants to see you. By the old well—now."

Sam ordered another beer. He drank it with deliberate slowness.

"She said it was very important," insisted Caradoc.

Sam envisioned the old well just beyond the crumbling walls of the Franciscan mission. Fine place to set up an ambush, like the one Hawk had stumbled into. Still, couldn't do no harm to see what she wanted. No harm at all, he said to himself as he brushed through the swinging doors and hurried out. . . .

There she was, leaning against an upright of the abandoned Papago shack facing the well. Through the screen of ocotillo branches, he could make out her white dress, the one that was low cut over her full bosom.

She held out a slim, soft hand as he stepped under the *ramada*.

"I thought you would never come, Blade," she said, and her husky contralto strummed deep inside him. He trembled, but he didn't want her to see how she affected him, and he ignored her hand. The moon tinted her tawny hair, and her lips were full, parted.

"You hate me, Blade," she said. "You've always hated me."

*Hate you?* he thought bitterly. *I should. I know what you did to Hawk. Ought to kill you for it. Maybe, some day, I will.*

She had moved closer to him, and he drank in the sweet, tantalizing fragrance of her. His breath came heavily.

***Just wait until she finds out that Tex can't yodel, sing or play the guitar!***

"What the hell do you want?" he said roughly.

"Blade, listen," she said. Her voice was grave. "Flood is out to get you. Leave town. Quick."

*Sure, leave town. Like she told Hawk to leave town.*

She put her hand on his arm. "Blade, please," she implored. "They'll kill you. Like they did Hawk."

THAT broke the spell, and he saw a picture of her telling Flood how she'd lured Hawk to his death, of her entwining her smooth arms around Flood's bull neck, of her kissing him passionately. The cancerous image infuriated him.

"You ought to remember how they killed Hawk," he rasped, "seeing as how you helped."

She shook her head. "I know you believe that, Blade," she said. "And I don't blame you because that's the way it looked. But it wasn't that way. I had nothing to do with it. I—I haven't forgotten Hawk."

"Then why are you back with Flood?" Sam shot back.

"You won't believe this either. But I might as well tell you: to help get evidence to hang him."

Sam laughed mockingly. "Next thing you'll be telling me you want to get Flood for killing the feller you loved."

Her voice fell to a whisper. "Hawk was sweet and kind. I—I saw in him a chance to get away from the rottenness of Flood. Only—I never loved Hawk."

"Sure," flared Sam, "you never loved him because you were Flood's woman all the time."

"No!" she cried. "I never can be his woman—any more."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'any more'?"

Wearily, she brushed back a curl from her forehead. "Blade, believe me," she implored. "I didn't know Flood was running guns to the Apaches until Hawk told me."

The scout's lip curled. "Reckon that made a helluva lot of difference to your kind of woman, didn't it?"

"It did," she said quietly, "because I saw el Maldito kill my father."

That jolted Sam. He waited silently for her to go on.

"It was ten years ago," she said in a low voice, "when we were coming here

from Kansas. We had only five wagons in our train, and we were nearing Tucson. Then el Maldito attacked. Most of the emigrants were killed outright. I survived. So did my father. But different fates were in store for us. I was a child; a child is always good for ransom.

"But before I was taken to the squaws' tent I was privileged to see what was going to happen to my father. I watched as el Maldito curved back an aspen branch and tied Father's hands to it. I watched as the braves quirted him. I watched as the squaws started to skin him—alive.

"And then, when his groans were faint, they piled wood under the tree and lit it. That, too, I was allowed to watch. I was only twelve then, and I saw all this."

Her voice broke, and Sam lit a cigarette with a sulphur match. He watched the yellow flame for an instant, then turned and said:

"So you saw all this and became a dance-hall girl and Flood's woman."

"Yes," she answered evenly. "I did. It wasn't the sort of life Father had planned for me. But the widowed storekeeper who bought me from the Indians turned me into a kitchen slavey. I worked from dawn to dusk, and when I wasn't working he'd try to paw me. I couldn't stand it, so. . . ." She shrugged.

SAM WAS stirred. He was thinking about putting a comforting hand on her shoulder when he heard the soft scraping noise near the Mission wall. He wheeled to meet it, gun drawn in tensed fingers.

Again it was Flood and with him Cyclone Skelly. Skelly started at the sight of Sam's Colt. Carefully he let the snout of his shotgun point harmlessly to the ground.

Flood tendered a plump hand to Kate and made a move to escort her from the *ramada*. But Sam grabbed the girl's wrist and shoved her aside.

"Do your talking from down there," he ordered.

The merchant turned to the girl. "Has Mr. Blade been annoying you, Kate?"

She tried to squirm out of Sam's grasp.

"Yes!" she exploded furiously. "Yes!" and she glared at Sam.

Flood chided her gently. "Then you shouldn't be out here holding trysts with him, my dear."

"Don't be a fool, Jim," she snapped. "I didn't come out here to hold hands with this—this savage. Pah! He stinks like a wild animal."

Sam could feel himself flush. Sure, he stank. Couldn't expect a man who's been sitting in the saddle constantly to smell like a perfumed tradesman.

"And he said he wanted to see me," she went on hurriedly. "Well, I wasn't here but a few minutes when he began to paw me, the beast!"

Flood broke into smug laughter. "It seems, Mr. Blade, that you weren't cut out for the part of an irresistible lover."

Sam eyed the corpulent merchant critically, as though he was sizing up beef on the hoof, and Flood grew irritable, uncertain under the scout's protracted and searching gaze.

"Well?" snapped the heavy man.

"Well," drawled Sam, "reckon she likes your money. Can't be the man."

The merchant turned rigid under the insult. Fingers clawed, his hand slunk closer to his gun, but drew away quickly when the hammer clicked on Sam's Colt.

KATE broke the impasse. She tried again to break out of Sam's grip, but her efforts only made the scout tighten his hold on her wrist.

"Listen," he said to her in a hard voice, "your man figures on using you for cover. But I ain't aiming to step into no traps. So you stay right here and quit your wriggling or I'll break your arm."

He leveled his gun at a pearl button on Flood's checked waistcoat.

"Get along, mister," he said. "I'll send your fancy woman back pronto, never you fear."

Flood raised his eyebrows. "Hiding behind a skirt, eh, Mr. Blade? Why, she might even have a gun on her."

"Could be," agreed Sam, "seeing as how

you seem to hide your guns in the most unlikely places."

He felt her quiver with rage.

When Flood and Skelly had vanished down the road, Sam released the girl. But she made no move to take leave of him.

"Blade," she said desperately, "Blade, please listen to me!"

"Get going," he said.

She stiffened, turned on her heel and was gone.

Sam waited five minutes, then walked off slowly toward the corral where he had stabled the gelding. Of course she had set a trap for him, but still he couldn't figure her out. Sweet to him, then sweet to Flood, then sweet to him again. Whose side was she on, anyway? He didn't hear the scraping of the stone beside him until it was too late. Something struck him on the temple. Then all was darkness. . . .

Sam opened his eyes. The desert stars started to spin like a whirlpool. He shut them again quickly. All he knew was that his skull felt as if it had been split open and that gentle fingers were soothing his forehead. He looked up and made out the burnished hair.

"What happened?" he mumbled.

"Skelly drygulched you."

He groaned and touched his temple gingerly. "Musta been clubbed," he said.

He sighed and was ready to let himself sink under the hypnosis of her fingertips when his distrust rose again, sharp and searing.

"Howcome you were around when all this happened?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I wasn't," she replied patiently. "After I left you, I saw Skelly sneak around the mission walls and club you with his shotgun. When I saw him raise his gun to hit you again, I shot at him. He ran."

"Didn't hit him, did you?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "It was dark."

He grunted and struggled to an elbow.

"But I can shoot," she protested.

He didn't reply. Why should Skelly want to kill him? He hadn't uncovered any proof that Flood was smuggling guns. Sure, Flood didn't know how much the scout knew. But the merchant wanted to find out. So he probably staged the whole thing. Skelly was to pole-ax him. Then Kate was to rescue him, win his confidence and pump him.

Well, he'd play it cagy this time. He'd pretend to believe her. Unsteadily, he rose to his feet. The lump on his head throbbed, and he caught her arm.

"Thanks, Kate," he said huskily. "Reckon I misjudged you."

THERE was an awkward silence. Then he pulled her to him, and his arms tightened around her waist. The closeness of her body inflamed him, and his mouth closed on hers with raw hunger. She responded fiercely to his bruising kiss, and her fingers bit into the back of his neck.

"Blade, Blade," she whispered.

He released her gently.

"I'll be back, Kate," he said. She kissed him again and turned her steps toward the Morgue. When she was out of sight, he quickened his pace to the stable, saddled his gelding and raced out to Old Eph's cabin.

The prospector greeted him at the door.

"Where you been?" he mumbled through toothless gums. "Been askin' fer ye all night. That Mex, what's-his-name, was here. I weren't in. But he left this yere note." He handed Sam a crumpled scrap of paper. "Guess he don't know I kain't read nohow."

The scrawl was in Spanish. Sam scanned it quickly:

"Get in touch with *Señor* Blade. Tell him to come quick. Gonzalez."

Sam crumpled the note in his fist and turned to the prospector.

"Get over to Camp Grant fast, Eph. Tell Cap'n Ogilby—he's the feller in command of the mounted troop—that I'm humping it over to Gonzalez' place. And tell him I got a good chance to nab el Maldito."

Sam jumped on his gelding. He was about to make off when he remembered something and bent down toward the old man.

"Say, Eph, ain't you been a mule skinner a spell back?"

The prospector straightened his bent back with an effort. "Yup. Done twenty year o' freightin' on the Santa Fe trail."

Sam nodded and continued. "Hear tell how road agents held you up once, looking for a gold shipment you were freighting from Council Bluff to Taos. But they never did find where you stashed it."

"That's right," said the old man proudly. "Sure did fool 'em."

"Sure musta," agreed Sam gravely. "But what I can't figure out is how you did it."

Old Eph cackled and slapped his thigh. "Nuther could they! But, sho', it were easy. Just cut some false bottoms into them big-bellied Murphy wagons and stowed the gold in 'em."

Sam looked at the prospector with new respect. "Sure was neat," he admitted. "And say, Eph, tell the cap'n we got a good chance to get Flood. With the goods, too. Tell him to hurry. Can you remember that?"

The old man broke into a quiet smile. "Well, seein' as how I never did like that soreback Flood, reckon I can remember well enough."

SAM MADE good time toward the Gila Bend, and as he topped the hill flanking the river, he saw there was no light in the shepherd's shack. Alarmed, the scout wondered if he was too late. Bending over the neck of the horse, Sam lashed him with his quirt. He started to race across the moon-washed stretch of flat land when a gun boomed loudly. Sam slid off the animal flattened out in the sand.

Another sharp crack of a gun. A slug whined over his head and he ducked.

Silence, dead silence, then a telltale flutter near a mesquite bush to his left. He whipped his carbine to his shoulder and fired, levered the weapon and fired again.

The second shot struck paydirt. A figure with long arms and stumpy legs rose, swayed against the moon and fell face forward. Skelly.

Silence again, and then Sam crawled toward the beckoning cover of a nearby rock.

A gun roared, this time to his right, and a bullet buried itself in the sand inches in front of his nose. Too close, admitted Sam, and he clawed into a depression. He waited for the rifleman to fire again.

Minutes passed, and each was an eternity. Sam ached from the waiting. He wondered how much longer it would be. Then the gun cracked again.

Even before its echo had a chance to die down, Sam tore off two quick shots at the betraying puff of smoke. There was a scream in French. A slender figure rolled lifelessly into the arroyo.

The Creole, Caradoc! Startled, Sam raised himself on his elbows and peered down at the arroyo. He hadn't suspected the gambler was in on the play.

The gun to his right barked, and Sam was knocked off his feet by the force of the heavy slug that tore through his shoulder.

He muffled a groan. Couldn't stay in the open any longer. The unseen rifleman had a bead on him now. He would have to chance it to the rock. Just a dozen feet away. He ran a few steps and dived behind it just as the gun flashed again, but the slug skidded harmlessly off the granite.

He had landed on his shoulder, and the pain of the fall was so intense he almost fainted. He could feel the blood trickling from the open wound, and he stuffed a kerchief inside his shirt. Clumsily, he tried to bind the wound, but found he couldn't do it with one hand. Cursing, he groped in the sand for his carbine.

Then he remembered. He had left it out in the open when he had dived behind the rock. Sweat streamed down his face. Daylight would come in a few hours. If his attacker saw the gun, he would stay out of range of Sam's Colt and pick off the scout at will.

ONLY one chance left now, a slim one at that. He'd have to stand up to draw the man's fire and hope the man would miss. No other way out.

Sam gripped his Colt in his hand and

stumbled to his feet. He felt almost naked as he stood in the moonlight, a towering target, waiting for the shot to come. Stillness settled over the wash like a heavy hand.

The wind had died down.

A gun roared from behind a big sahuaro. Sam felt a bullet slice a patch of skin off his ribs. He counted mechanically as he fired—one, two, three. And when the smoke lifted, he saw there was no sign of movement near the sahuaro.

Sam floundered over to the fallen body. He grabbed the head by the hair and turned it up.

The eyes of Jim Flood gazed sightlessly on the moon.

It was all over, thought Sam dully, as far as Flood was concerned. He tried to reload his Colt with one hand, but couldn't managed it. Picking up Flood's rifle, he staggered toward the shack. A light was on now.

In the doorway stood Gonzalez, rifle in hand.

"*Señor* Blade!" he cried.

"Put down the gun," said Sam.

"But what has happened, *Señor*?"

"Ambushed," said Sam. His voice was thick. Loss of blood was making him lightheaded.

Gonzalez' eyes narrowed. "Ha!" he said softly. "I know who has led you into this trap. The woman of Flood!"

Sam tried to shake his head; the effort was too much.

"Not this time," he said weakly. "You did it with that note. Drop that gun—*el Maldito*!"

The shepherd let the rifle clatter to the ground. He stood still and erect, and when he spoke it was in the soft gutturals of his native Chiricahua.

"The Lone Eagle is wise. He has the nose of the wolf, the eyes of the hawk and the cunning of the bear. How did he discover my secret?"

"I read the sign," replied Sam.

"Sign?" asked the Chiricahua. "Did *el Maldito*, whose footsteps are so light he disturbs not a grain of sand, leave sign?"

Sam nodded. "Like a sack of grain dragged across the ground. In your shack you offered me horsemeat. Now a Mexican will eat horsemeat if victuals are scarce, but he ain't crazy about it. Ain't nobody but an Indian who'll call it a delicacy.

"And your tobacco was a dead giveaway. Mexicans like straight Sonora. But you mixed yours with red willow bark—like the Chiricahuas do to stretch the tobacco ration they get up at the reservation.

"What convinced me was that note you sent Old Eph. If you knew Old Eph as well as you said you did, you'd a' known he can't even read English, let alone Spanish."

Sam paused. He was breathing heavily, and the pain was again clawing like fury at his shoulder.

He looked at the Indian steadily: "I'm taking you back—"

Before he could finish, the Apache leaped and twisted the rifle from the scout's hands. Sam slid to his knees. His wound, bleeding afresh, ebbed his strength. He was past caring about anything. Death would be a welcome release from the horrible pain, and he heard the Indian's voice floating as from far away:

"The Lone Eagle is a brave warrior. It is too bad that he must die, but so it is with brave warriors."

A shot rang out, and he lost consciousness. . . .

When he opened his eyes again, he wondered why he wasn't dead. Maybe the Apache was toying with him. Maybe he missed. Then he turned his head to one side and saw the Indian crumpled on the floor.

Sam glanced up. Kate was ripping a strip of cloth from her petticoat. She bound his wound tightly. It hurt like hell, but he didn't mind it so much, now.

He turned his eyes questioningly at the dead Apache.

She smiled down at him.

"I told you I could shoot—my sweet."

He was inclined to believe her, now and forever.

The CASA

# JACK BUILT

by BEN T. YOUNG

*WHEN A MAN STARTS to build a house, you can't blame a gal for wanting to know whom it's for*

THE BIG HORN Mountain Boys, fetched out from Sheridan, were fairly blowing, scraping and pounding their horns, fiddles and what-nots to doll rags. Hauling in another long breath, the caller with a voice like an old-time mule-skinner let fly again:

*"Now you're right and now you're wrong,*
*Meet your honey and travel home,*
*Ladies to their seats, gents all foller,*
*Thank the fiddler and kiss the caller."*

With a final crash the music and stomping stopped, and the last dance of the season was over. In a day or so the dudes would be shucking their eye-searing costumes and hitting the trail back East again. The Bar V Bar's extra help, including Genie Gardner, would pull foot too. That is, Genie would go unless Jack Eden had something to say to her.

Clutching one of his arms and slightly lifting the long full skirt of her home-made cotton square-dance dress, she skilfully—like a top cutting horse—snaked him out of the laughing, panting crowd and into the cozy darkness beside the long mess-hall. As always, Liz Ballew would be hot on Jack's trail, and Dolph Carr after Genie. If those two horned in and Genie didn't get a rise out of Jack tonight, she'd go plumb nuts.

"How's your *casa* coming along?" she asked softly when they were around back where there were no windows or moonlight. Standing very close, she began dialing one of the buttons on Jack's shirt, as if he were a radio and she could maybe get the program she wanted.

"Shucks," the big lug gulped, apparently well insulated against her high voltage, and stuffing his fists into the hip pockets of his California pants.

"I figured to have that little ol' place done 'fore now," he mumbled, "but—well, shucks."

After a breathless wait for more which didn't come, she quit dialing and stepped back. *My stars,* she groaned inwardly, wanting to shake him, *he must be shaping up that spread with some girl in mind. Who? Me? That Ballew wench? A gal from somewhere else? Why can't I find out?*

"S'pose you'll be headin' back to some office job in Denver," he remarked, and if he gave a hoot one way or the other he sure didn't show it.

Close to tears, she sought refuge in flippancy. "Give that gentleman five silver dollars," she laughed. "What else would I do?"

Though she waited hopefully, that perfectly fair if leading question seemed to have knocked down all his tenpins in that alley. He gulped, fired a smoke, and leaned back against the peeled-log wall.

*Apparently that Soldier Creek rancho isn't intended as a home for me,* she decided. *But you never know your luck till the dice quit rolling. Oh, damn!*

Welcome as wet dogs in a parlor, the long-legged Ballew outfit and Dolph Carr had strolled into sight. Even in the cold light of the moon it was evident that Liz was a pretty package. Her bare arms and shoulders gleamed, her red hair glinted, and the way she managed to wear that phony Forty-Niner dress would sure have deflected the Gold Rush.

"Ho, there you are!" she chortled, sighting the glow of Jack's cigarette and striding toward them. "Here's your gal, Dolph."

*Well, there goes the ball game,* Genie sighed to herself. There was nothing she could do. Liz and Carr were guests, and she had to be civil to them. "Hi, chum," she said with hard-come politeness, cringing as Carr took her arm.

"Fit as a fiddle and tight as a drum," Carr announced.

And how right he was about that latter, which made him doubly annoying to a gal like Genie who didn't like being pawed.

"Well, good night, everybody," she said, starting toward the now dark ranch house.

Moving along beside her, Carr was amiable enough till sure the others were not following. Then he toughened up. "Listen, Miss Arctic Circle for 1950." His fingers bit into the soft flesh of her upper arm. "I don't go for this deep-freeze routine you've been giving me all summer. Relax. You've got me running a temperature, and—"

"Would this be a proposal of marriage?" she cut in lightly.

"Why not?"

"Thank you, but no."

"If you're holding out for that cowboy, I'm laughing." Carr's voice was getting rougher with tension. "In spite of her fine Vassar training, Miss Elizabeth Ballew has the ethics of a Kansas tornado. She's jumped your claim there."

"Let's turn the record over. It doesn't make sense on this side," Genie interrupted hurriedly, trying to quicken her pace.

But, stopping abruptly, he jerked her back. Unfortunately it was in the deep shadows beneath a huge cottonwood. "I could start smiling," he said, his face suddenly stiff and ugly, "but I almost never do. Now—"

His other arm went about her, his spread fingers caught in her black curls, and her struggles were as futile as those of a trout caught in a landing net.

"No! You mustn't!" she whispered fiercely, turning her face aside and hoping to avoid rousing the occupants of the house.

But, relentless as a tax collector, he forced her face around and found her lips. For a moment she pretended to have surrendered, but the instant the apparent victory made him careless she ducked, twisted and tore free.

"You brat!" he said through his teeth as he grabbed. One hand caught the little puff sleeve at her shoulder, but with a wrench she left it with him and had bulged into the house before he'd got his feet untangled.

AFRAID to turn on the light in her ground-floor room, she undressed in the dark. When ready for bed she peeked out past the side of the window

shade. No one in sight. The long line of cabins facing the creek was dark. The place seemed as deserted as a nightclub at noon.

But Jack's old pickup was still down by the bunkhouse, which meant that Liz was still making medicine. *He saw that Dolph was lit and on the prowl,* she thought bitterly. *Yet he made no move to see me safely inside.*

Too fretful to sleep, she lay for a long time hearing the mourning doves in the thicket across the creek, and brooding over her troubles. On Carr she wasted little thought. Handsome after a hard somewhat dissipated fashion but crowding forty, and obviously a well heeled case of arrested development, he'd been a nuisance all summer. But he'd be leaving tomorrow, so that was that. It was Jack Eden who'd swept her clean off her size four wedge-heel sandals. Yet it now looked as though she had about as much chance of tying onto him as of patting a deer on the rump.

When she'd arrived at the Bar V Bar in the spring, to take over the clerical work incident to the dude end of the business, Jack had been one of the outfit's riders. They'd built right up to each other, and things were running along finer than peach fuzz till Jack had to go help shove the cattle up onto the summer range. While he was gone Liz Ballew had bulged in, and when he'd come back Liz had taken one look, shaken out a loop to fit, and gone after him.

Being old-fashioned as a covered wagon in his courtesy toward women, he'd been a sitting duck for a fireball like Liz. Maybe he really did prefer her company to that of the pint-sized office girl, but if not he was too polite to show it. Then perhaps Liz had crowded him too hard and spooked him, or maybe (as Carr had said) she'd got him thrown and hogtied. At any rate he'd up and quit, set up a camp on the little layout where he was already running a few horses, and started building a house.

Either riding one of the ranch cavvy, or driving the beat-up old coupé she'd bought in town, Liz was continually over there. But while Genie often spent her off hours in the saddle, pride kept her from riding that way.

Occasionally, like tonight, Jack would show up at the Bar V Bar. Whether he was just being neighborly, or wanted to make talk with his old *compadres* at the bunkhouse, or do some courtin', you couldn't tell by the jigger's countenance. Anyway, he always wound up with Liz.

That well curved breath-stopper, one of those breezy outfits from Pittsburgh or wherever, was sure warped on the West and its younger male natives. And many such-like gals, with plenty of money and six bits over, were latching onto cowpoke husbands—boys either too bewildered to know what hit them, or foxy enough to play the game and wind up with a *rancho* of their own. Which of these was Jack?

With nerves tight as fiddle strings she lay listening, hoping to hear his noisy old truck pull out. But save for the doves and the rush of the creek there wasn't a sound, and presently she drifted into a restless sleep. Of course she dreamed, a nightmarish jumble of scenes involving the Van Meters who owned the outfit, old Emmet Ricks who bossed the riders, and Jack and Liz and Adolph Carr.

Then wishful thinking had its way, and Liz and Carr appeared no more. In Jack's arms she was being carried across the threshold of a new little house on Soldier Creek, and when the door was closed. . . .

HOT AND trembling she came awake. Where? What? "Oh," she whimpered, remembering. Quietly as possible a truck was easing down the road toward the gate, and the dismal grey light of dawn was seeping into the room.

Feeling like something that had been up a tree all night, she rose and got into shirt, levis and boots, ready for the day's work of checking out dudes and completing the payroll of maids, kitchen and corral help no longer required.

As she crossed the yard to the mess-hall the first rays of the sun were pink on the Cloud Peak glacier, but this morning no yipping wranglers were chousing the dude horses in from the night pasture, no early anglers were abroad, no preparations were being made for a drive up to the Crow

Agency and Custer battlefield or over to Yellowstone. This unusual quiet and the chill wind rustling the yellowing leaves on the trees sent her spirits to an all-time low, and a lump the size of a saddle-horn seemed stuck in her throat.

"Hi, Genie!" one of the wranglers yelled as she entered the dining room. "Where's that thousand-watt smile you usually got?"

All of the help were there, staring like hoot-owls. Most of them of course suspected what her trouble was. While some faces showed sympathy, many of the gals seemed amused.

Then Emmet Ricks, a man to tie to in any kind of weather, rose and drew out the chair next to his. "Set here, ma'am," he said gently as one would speak to a spooked pony. But it was no good. She wanted no food, and after a cup of black coffee hurried to the office.

Jumpy as a cat on ice, she found it difficult to concentrate. Now and again she'd just sit staring out the window. In one of the open car-ports Dolph Carr's yellow convertible stood out like an Eskimo in a kayak. One doesn't acquire such gadgets by saving box-tops, and she supposed what she'd heard of Dolph's inherited wealth was true. But money and social standing didn't keep him from being a first-class heel, and she'd be glad to see that outfit chuffing down the road for the last time.

The departing Jacksons came in then, to settle their score and say good-bye; and Dolph slouched into the office.

"Hi, sugar," he grinned, cocky as a bull going through a brush fence. "Guess maybe I was racing my engine a little last night. Too much tanglefoot. Sorry."

Cringing under the hungry stare of his pale, bloodshot eyes, she shrugged. "Forget it. Here's your bill."

Shaking his sparse-haired and greying head, he waved it away. "Tomorrow, after lunch."

"But we're closing down today!"

"Rules and laws and stuff are made to be broken, honey. I just turned the old charm on and Tom Van Meter says I may stay. Liz is staying too. Look!" He jerked his chin toward the open doorway.

DOWN by the corral Sam Kane, one of the regular cowhands, was cinching a saddle on his own pet buckskin. Leaning against the fence so that all her curves were out in the open stood the gorgeous redhead. She was watching Sam, but Sam didn't have his mind on his work. Only habit kept him from throwing the rigging on hind side foremost. And small wonder, for Liz wore chokebore breeches and a green sweater that must have been sprayed on.

"See what I mean?" Dolph lightly grasped Genie's elbow. "A dumb ranch hand is bound to fall for that obvious stuff."

She saw, all too clearly, that favorable attention from a dazzler like that would stampede 'most any man; that her chances of holding onto Jack hadn't been worth one white chip. "So what?" she snapped, turning back to her work.

Carr shrugged and strolled to the door. "Well, be seein' you."

But he was already out of Genie's mind. Why he was staying an extra day she neither knew nor cared, but Liz Ballew was really a hair in the butter. Sure as sunup Liz was right now headed for Jack's bailiwick. Maybe, as the future mistress of the place, she had every right to be there, but that didn't make it any easier for Genie to take. She had hoped that Jack might show up to bid her good-bye, but that chance was gone like last spring's flowers. In fact, come to think of it, he hadn't even asked when she was leaving. "Oh, damn!" she said, fighting back tears.

*But I've just got to see Jack again,* she told herself desperately, staring out the office window. Compared to the rowdydow that had been going on all summer, the place now seemed empty as a blown egg. Down by the pile of logs the old roustabout was working up firewood for the coming cold months, and Sam Kane was tinkering with the runners which would replace the wheels on the hay wagon when the snow came and the stock had to be fed. Then Emmet Ricks rode in from somewhere, left his bay gelding at the hitch-rail and high-heeled into the barn.

*I'll go talk to him,* she decided suddenly,

*"Hold it!" she panted, fumbling for the Luger's safety*

taking her Stetson and leather jacket from the peg on the wall.

Finding him alone in the saddle room, she was about to spread her cards and ask his advice, but the old mossyhorn didn't let her get started. "Look, ma'am," he said, taking up a slickear bridle. "You've been a-ridin' that office chair too steady and look peaked. I got to go up yonder a piece, so I'll jest rig up a pony fer you and we'll go together."

"Fine," she said gratefully, and soon they started.

Both were silent till they'd crossed the creek. Then Emmet turned in his saddle and cuffed back the brim of his floppy grey hat. "I ain't much fer strayin' off my home range," he announced. "But I took to you right from the start, and if there's some way I can help iron out what's troublin' you, I'll bust a tug a-tryin'. Spill it."

"That house Jack Eden's building," she blurted.

"Yes'm. It's a-goin' to be right smart of a shebang. Logs and fieldstone, with a settin'-room fireplace big enough to roast a steer in. Plumbin', too, with water piped in from the crick; and 'lectricity from storage batteries kept goin' by one of them wind-chargers on the roof. Jack seems to be as good a hand with tools as he is with horses and cows."

"Where's he get the money for all that?" Genie was now almost certain that Liz was supplying it.

"Dunno, fer sure." Emmet was staring at his pony's ears. "Jack always draws good wages, and he's corralled some at poker and as a bronc-rider in rodeo shows. Could be he's saved it."

"What's he want a house for? What I mean is, does he plan to get married?"

Solemn as a treeful of owls, Emmet wagged his head. "That I couldn't say, ma'am. Jack's close-mouthed 'bout his personal affairs. He's too shy to be much of a hand with womenfolks, though. If he aims to throw in with somebody it must be either some extra-special gal he jest couldn't resist, or one what took the reins right out'n his hands."

Again they fell silent, and neither spoke again till Emmet had examined a gate he'd been worried about and they were headed home. "Would you do me a favor?" Genie asked then.

Emmet's sun-puckered eyes twinkled. "If you want that fly-blown Carr outfit worked over, it can be arranged. Any man on the place, includin' Van Meter hisself, would be glad to oblige."

She shook her head. "Dolph Carr's the least of my troubles. It's Jack Eden. I want him like crazy, but the redhead—"

"Bah, that one," Emmet growled.

"Well, she's got him anyhow, so that's that." Genie was having trouble with her eyes and voice. "But I just can't leave without seeing him once more. If you could spare the time to drift around that way any time tomorrow before three o'clock, and just casually mention that I'm leaving on the four o'clock bus, he might take it into his head to come see me off. Don't suggest it to him. If he doesn't think of it himself. . . ." She choked up then, and from there on in Emmet cussed steadily under his breath.

AT DINNER time Genie took steps to avoid Carr by entering the dining room flanked by two surprised but pleased cowpokes who rode close herd on her throughout the meal. But Carr did not appear. However, the minute she'd bade them good night and was hurrying to her room, he intercepted her. "How 'bout a movie?" he asked. "I'm sober as Sunday."

"And sorry for it, I'll bet," she answered with a wry smile, edging into the light from one of the ranch-house windows. "No, thanks a lot, but I have to pack."

Later, while engaged in that task, she was interrupted by Kate Van Meter. "We're sure sorry your time's up here, Genie," Kate sighed, brushing back a lock of greying hair. "You've done just fine, always pleasant as a sunny day and all; and goodness knows most dudes would make a body tromp on little chickens. We sure wouldn't bother with 'em save that just now it's the only way to make ends meet. You've got worked lined up in Denver, I suppose."

Genie shook her head. Usually forehanded in such matters, this time she'd let it ride, hoping desperately that she'd not be returning to the mile-high city. "I'll find something," she said, rolling levis about her boots.

"Well—" stifling a yawn Kate rose—"if we're still in the business next spring, and you want to come back, just write and say so. And that's more than I'd tell some of our guests. My land, when Tom told me he'd agreed to let that Ballew girl and Dolph Carr stay over till tomorrow, I was just plumb put out. Liz is likeable in a way, but too gamey for my taste. That miserable Carr, though. . . ."

Resuming her seat Kate inflated again. "As you've seen, he's a regular walking whiskey vat. Though he came well recommended else he'd not have got in, I heard later—from those Nortons who were here in July—that he's too bad to be put off on a borrowing neighbor, married three times and I don't know what all. Right from the start, after seeing that wild look in his eyes, I suspected he didn't have all his buttons. The Nortons said he'd once been confined in a private institution as the result of some particularly crazy randy-do. I'll sure be glad to see the last of him."

Rising again, Kate reached for the doorknob. "Well, Tom says he or one of the boys will drive you in about three tomorrow. Good night."

Soon Genie turned in too; and tonight, exhausted by her mental turmoil, she slept like one drugged. Again she was up before the cook whanged the old wagon-tire beside the kitchen door and, lest she be crowded for time to dress again, got into the clothes she planned to travel in.

"Judas, I don't see how a girl could get so pretty in so few years," Tom Van Meter grinned when she met him on the porch. "That jug-headed Jack Eden sure must have got his forelegs crossed to have fallen for that—"

As though he'd smacked into a tree Van Meter stopped short and turned as red as tomato soup.

"You're excused," she smiled wanly as he tucked tail into the house.

OF COURSE neither Liz nor Carr was up for an early breakfast; but about mid-morning, after Genie had paid off and said *adios* to the boys and gals who were leaving, Liz stalked in. While the street outfit she wore was simple and in good taste, what she did to it would have made even the great Ziegfeld choke on his popcorn.

"Hiya," she said breezily, opening a check book. "While the boys are loading my traps I'll settle up. What's the score?" With head cocked to keep the smoke from the king-size cigarette out of her eyes, she signed over an amount that paid for her last two weeks but would have kept some of her hard-working ancestors in grub through a winter.

"Thank you," Genie said, polite as two strange dogs. "Hope you have no trouble selling your car before train time. Or are you flying East?"

"Missed with both barrels, pet," Liz chortled in that throaty voice which seemed to make old men younger and young men plumb loco. "I've decided to stay in town for a while, at the Inn."

"How smart of you!" Genie's smile was like a swig of prussic acid as she slammed the cash drawer shut. "My dad was quite a fisherman. Sportsman, too. Used a fly instead of bait, and never fished a pool when someone else was there first. He always said that even when a trout seemed to be securely hooked, one had to keep a tight line and take no chances."

"My dad was a sportsman too," Liz said, calm as a puddle as she exhaled a lungful of smoke. "Polo, salt-water fishing, all that stuff. He used to tell me that when the game was lost to forget it. 'By, Genie." Out she went to her car which Sam Kane had just driven up. Leaving Sam dazed from a kiss and an eyeful of nylons, she roared away like a streamliner two hours late. "Oh, drop dead," said Genie, whose wits had hung fire.

As the clock on the wall ate up the minutes, Genie became increasingly tense. Emmet had promised to do as she'd asked, and he would; but would Jack bother to go in to the bus station? If he did show that

much interest, dogged if she wouldn't give him the works. She, too, could make like a she-wolf if that's what he wanted. She'd get him so hot and bothered he'd forget she couldn't finance a hen-coop much less a ranch house.

*I can't outclass that economy-size clothes-horse, that's sure,* she told herself. *But if she's still top dog when I've shot off all my firecrackers, she really will have earned the right to pay for that Soldier Creek layout.*

Toward noon she saw Carr stowing luggage in his yellow go-devil, but he didn't even glance at the office, nor pay her any attention as she entered the smaller winter dining room for lunch. *Maybe at last he's convinced I'm not willing to even trifle with the idea of becoming the fourth Mrs. Adolph Carr,* she decided, feeling relief on that score at least.

And when, now wearing a well tailored tweed suit, he sauntered into the office about two to pay his bill, he still was impersonal as a mere acquaintance. Just to be polite Genie called good-by when he started out. "Oh, I'll be around for a bit yet," he said over his shoulder, then went out of her sight and mind.

Then Van Meter showed up, and by the time she'd been relieved of her duties and paid off it was nearing three. "All packed?" he asked. "I'll send Sam up after your bags."

WHEN Sam arrived his eyes went big and round at the rings. "Great snakes, you're sure painted fer war, ain't you?" he grinned, noting her more-than-usual amount of make-up. "That hat, too. Makes me think of the time I was ridin' the range fer the cameras out 'round Hollywood. I sure been overlookin' a bet all summer by not—"

"Sam." Looking worried as a man crosswise of the Collector of Internal Revenue, Van Meter bulged in. "Was the station wagon running all right when you brought it back this noon?"

"Slick as calf slobber, Tom. Why?"

"Motor's a dead load now. No spark, and I can't see why. And the damn truck's gone off after corral poles. Why not wait over till tomorrow, Genie?"

"Oh, I can't really!" she gasped, fearful of missing Jack. "I've just got to go today if there's any possible way."

***She looked over the treeless, eroded landscape***

"Well, come on, then," he sighed. "I'll try again to get the darned thing going. Bring those warbags, Sam."

Halfway to the garage they met up with Carr. "Thought you and Genie had gone, Tom," he remarked casually.

"Damn station wagon's gone mulish," Tom growled, not stopping.

"Well, hell, I'll take her in," Carr called. "Put her stuff in my car, Sam. I was just leaving anyway and will be glad to drop her off in town."

Van Meter stopped. So did Sam and Genie. *No,* a voice inside her warned. But she was between a rock and a hard place, so she ignored the voice and nodded to Van Meter and Sam who, both seeming dubious, were looking at her. "Okay," she sighed, thinking how all summer long she'd sidestepped Carr invitations to go driving, and

how now, at the last minute, fate had dealt him a winning hand.

When Kate arrived in time to see Genie's luggage being stowed in the yellow car, she raised hell and put a chunk under it. "You stay right here, Genie," she ordered, throwing a look at Dolph which must have steamed up his sunglasses.

"I can't, really," Genie pleaded.

"Well, then, I'll promise you this, mister," Kate declared, turning on Dolph. "If Genie doesn't call us from the bus station —and before four o'clock, mind you—I'll call the sheriff and have road blocks set up on every trail out of Wyoming."

"And guess who gits what on the snout when you're ketched," Sam added, showing a bony fist.

But as they traveled the eighteen curly miles out of the foothills and into town, Carr behaved like a watched Puritan. Thankful as a dude getting down from a first horseback ride, Genie loosed a sigh that came from way down yonder.

"See, harmless as a pet rabbit," Dolph snickered, slowing at the Main Street intersection.

"Here, the bus station's that way!" she cried when he didn't turn.

PRETENDING to be occupied with the problem of passing a wobbly jaloppy full and running over with Crow Indians, he didn't answer. When he'd passed the Crows, the convertible shot forward like a spooked jackrabbit.

"Listen, Dolph!" Scared as a sage-hen in a coyote's mouth, she managed to keep her voice steady, though raising it to be heard above the rush of wind and the snarl of the tires on the graveled road. "No monkey business. Take me to the bus station."

He shook his bare head. "Don't be silly. You're homeless as a poker chip, and there's no reason why you shouldn't marry me."

"Best reason in the world." She was watching the climbing speedometer and seeing it would be suicide to jump. "I detest you."

"All of my wives have detested me," he laughed. "But they enjoyed what my money could buy, just the same. Anyway, I get bored easily, and soon turn out to be no bother at all. Wouldn't you rather spend this winter in Palm Springs or Guaymas or Mexico City than in Denver?"

"You'll spend it in jail," she warned as, now clear of any signs of human habitation, he slowed to fifty to make talking easier. "The Van Meters will—"

"The Van Meters are hamstrung till they find where I cut their telephone wire," Carr chortled. "And the ignition wire under the dash on their station wagon. Anyway, when they do notify the sheriff and he sets up road blocks, no one will think of this old dirt track we're on."

She looked out over the treeless eroded landscape which seemed to serve no useful purpose other than to hold the world together. "Where's it lead to?"

Carr shrugged. "Meanders hither and yon. No towns till we get past the Wolf Mountains up in Montana. Then a few little jerkwater places where we'll find a bite to eat and probably a J. P. or minister. By the time we get to Miles City, the first place they're apt to be on the lookout for a yellow car containing a kidnaper and his victim, they'll find a loving husband and his bride."

"You didn't think this out very well, Butch. The West isn't so wild any more. You can't hunt or fish or even get married without a license."

"Drove up yesterday and got one. Got this hardware, too." From his pocket he took a tiny box, flipped open the spring lid to reveal a diamond-studded platinum ring. Dropping it into his pocket again he indulged in a bit of a smirk. "I've got a head on me."

"Huh," she scoffed. "I've seen better heads on a horseshoe nail. Didn't it occur to you that I'll run out on you the first time we stop?"

"Not if you're as smart as I think you are, you'll not. Just consider what you'll be gettin—a checking account of your own, a car to drive—"

"You've never grown up, have you?" she cut in. "A spoiled brat who never learned that there are some things money

won't buy. Now get this crazy notion out of your head and—"

"Maybe it is a crazy notion," he grinned, "but I've had crazy notions before. In fact I once spent some months in what is inelegantly called a nut house because a little jerk of a nightclub singer. . . . What d'you see?"

"Nothing." Quickly she pulled her eyes away from the rear-vision mirror.

But he took a look, saw the distant cloud of dust, then poured on the gas.

"Cigarette," Carr yelled, nudging her and pointing to the glove compartment on her side of the dash.

LEST he turn out to be one of those "Look, no hands," idiots and try to get one himself, she opened the little door and took out a fresh pack, not letting on she'd noticed the butt of an automatic pistol under a folded road-map.

"Thanks," he nodded when she'd fished out a smoke and stuck it between his lips.

As he reached for the lighter the almost flying car skidded around a sharp curve, all but upset. "Fun, eh?" he yelled when she clutched his arm to keep upright.

*He is crazy,* she told herself, seeing his moist lips hanging loose in an idiotic grin. Up till now she'd felt confident of talking him out of this, but no more. Hell was out of its shuck. Like as not they'd overturn on this next curve and. . . .

No, by Judas, they'd made it! And now momentarily clear of their own dust she saw, far behind but still coming, the dust from the other car. *Maybe they are chasing us,* she thought with rising hopes. *They'll never catch us, though, unless. . . .*

Her mind was moving like jet propulsion. If he'd only slow down enough. "Look, Dolph," she said, pointing off to the left. "Gully. Slow down."

"Nuts, we'll jump it," he laughed, and his eyes behind the green glasses were bright with crack-brained excitement.

"Well, then hold everything," she said through her teeth as she slid to the far side of the seat and stooped as though to touch one of her brown high-heeled pumps. Then, quick as the flick of a bronc's tail, she reached under the dash, got a fistful of wires and yanked. Something gave way.

"Damn you!" Carr screamed as the motor quit. But instinctively he kept his hands on the wheel. Anyway, by now she had the gun and was ready to bail out the minute the outfit slowed sufficiently.

But Carr outfoxed her. He jammed on the brakes. As they stopped with a skidding jolt that nearly popped her through the windshield, he lunged and grabbed. One hand caught the front of her flimsy blouse.

With a wrench she tore free, and before he could slide from under the wheel and past the parking brake, she'd scrambled out. "Hold it!" she panted, fumbling with her thumb for the Luger's safety.

"Hell, who's afraid to die?" he babbled, stepping to the seat to jump.

As he sprang she sidestepped. The toe of one of his shoes ticked the door-top, and he fell flat as a stove-lid.

"Now stay there or I'll shoot," she ordered, with one eye on the rapidly approaching car. And, reluctant to shoot even a crazy man, she hoped to goodness he *would* stay there.

HE DID, his breath coming in long, tearing gasps as he tried to get his bellows going again. Then, abrupt as a thunderclap, he rolled, bounced to his feet and whirled. "Careful, buster," Genie advised, jerking her head toward the nearly there coupé. "Here's the cavalry."

Carr looked. His jaw dropped a foot and forty inches. "Liz, the dirty double-crosser!" he gasped.

"What d'you mean, double-crosser?" Genie flicked a startled glance and saw the redhead.

"Hell, she's been on my side right along," Carr growled like a petulant child. "Led that dumb cowboy of yours to think you'd gone after me and my money. Maneuvered him into staying all night at the ranch after the dance so that you, not knowing he was in the bunkhouse with the boys, would give him the old heave-ho. But—"

He flinched as the sliding-to-a-stop coupe showered him with dirt and both Jack and Emmet hit the ground a-running.

"Carr!" Jack roared, balling his fists.

"Easy, boy," Emmet cautioned, catching Jack's arm. "Smash them glasses into his eyes, and you'll be belt-deep in trouble."

So Jack socked Carr in the bread-sack, knocked him tail-over-brisket into the sand-burs and stuff. "Now get up and see what falls off!" Jack stormed.

"Don't, Jack, he's not responsible. Sick in the head. Really!" Genie cried.

"Great Lord, what a mess!" Jack groaned, at long last putting an arm about her. "I've been mixed as a basket of snakes, thinkin' you really had got gold colic and lined out after this coot's *dincro.*"

"I have you to thank for that," Genie seethed, turning on Liz who now stood beside them. "There may be lower characters than you, but it would take a well-digger's rig to find them."

"Easy, Genie," Jack said, taking the Luger from her. "If Emmet hadn't showed up and mentioned that you were leaving today, I never would have been at the bus station. But me 'n' him would have been a-settin' there yet if Liz hadn't seen you 'n' Carr go streakin' through town and out this road. Guessin' right off what he was up to, she high-tailed to the bus depot, picked me 'n' Emmet up and fetched us along. So we've got her to thank for that."

"Oh, to hell with the citation, Jack," Liz cut in, tossing away her cigarette. "I've been a louse, Genie. I went after Jack with no holds barred, using every trick a gal like me knows. When he didn't come all undone, as past experience had led me to suppose he would, I really got in there and pitched. I offered to set him up as a big-time rancher. No soap there, either, so I lied about you and Dolph. But the poker face just went on building his house."

TWISTING in his arm, Genie looked up into Jack's face. "Why in the world didn't you tell me you were building that *casa* with me in mind? A girl likes to have a say about the place she's to live in. Besides, you never asked if I'd marry you."

"Well, shucks. I—"

"Seems he had the old-fashioned notion a man should have a home to offer," Emmet horned in, chewing a blade of grass as he kept an eye on Carr. "Too, Jack was holdin' off till he saw if you did want to tie onto this clown and his money."

"If he thought for a minute I was that kind of a tramp, why did he go on with the house?" Genie wanted to know.

Emmet shrugged. "A man can't leave a house half up and half down with winter a-comin' on. Now what'll we do with him?" He jerked his thumb toward Carr.

"Load him into that misguided missile of his," Liz ordered.

"I don't think it will go," Genie opined. "I pulled some wires."

"Then make like a mechanic and fix it, Jack," Liz told him. "You, Emmet, take Genie's stuff out and put mine in. I'll drive him on to Miles City, leave him in jail or a hospital, notify his relatives, and take the train East from there."

"But, Liz!" Genie protested. "He really is dangerous!"

"Not to me, he's not," Liz declared.

"You hadn't ought to do it, Liz," Jack called as he got the stalled motor going. "You damn near tore down my playhouse, but I'd hate to see you get in a jam."

"Please don't, Liz," Genie cut in. "We'll all go back to town together and—"

"And you who're going to live there will have your name smeared all over the paper, a fine start for a bride in that gossipy countryside." Liz took the Luger and the convertible's keys away from Jack. "No, we'll do it my way and no one will be the wiser, if you can catch the Van Meters before they spill it far and wide. Line out, now. Sell that old wreck of mine and get yourselves a wedding present. Here are the ownership papers, Jack. Wait, I'll sign it over right now. Got Dolph all tucked in, Emmet?"

With a flourish she gave away her car and held out her hands, one to Genie and one to Jack. "Good luck," she said with a smile that had tears in it and was gone.

Busy stowing away Genie's warbags, Emmet had his fore end clear into the coupé's trunk. So, as Jack's arms drew her close, Genie lifted her lips to his.

# Foot Racer's Reward

*By Dabney Otis Collins*

BOTH SIDES of Lode City's street were lined with miners. They were laughing and joking, and on their bearded faces sat a pleasant anticipation. There was no one left in the mines except those working the pumps. Gold pan and sluice box were dry. For this was the Fourth of July.

The single and double jack contests had been decided. The turkey shoot was over. Now was coming the main event of the celebration, the foot race between the stranger called Spike and the miners' man, Mark Mueller. For more than a month they had talked of it. And plenty of gold backed the talk, all the loose gold in camp.

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***MARK BET everything, even his happiness, on his own speed***

In the Nickel Plate Saloon the bartender, Tex, set two equal-sized little sacks of dust under the counter. He bent his lanky six feet over a sheet of foolscap writing paper, writing down the bet.

"How much now?" asked a broken-nosed man in a red flannel shirt.

Tex scowled down at the paper, his lips working slowly, "Close to four thousand, near as I can figger." His shallow blue eyes studied the miner. "Some is goin' to celebrate, and some ain't."

"Well, I aim to," the miner said. "My money's on Mark."

"All foolishment," said onion-bald Dutch Schultz, the saloon's owner. "Half off you hass to loose."

"You pays your money and takes your choice, as they say." As he turned to the back bar, Tex smiled crookedly. He started to say something, when a boy's excited voice shrilled from the street:

"There they go to the starting place! Better win, Mark! I got all my marbles bet on you."

Spike chuckled. "Shame to lose that kid's marbles."

MARK MUELLER glanced at the wiry little man striding beside him in the narrow street. Spike's head barely reached to Mark's shoulder, but he was built for speed. His chest was deep, his legs abnormally short for his thighs. His trousers were rolled above his knees, and at each quick step the smooth muscles of his calves rippled in leashed power. In a short race Mark knew he could never outrun Spike. But this race was to be about three-quarters of a mile. His wind, made strong by the daily climb to his mine above timberline, should hold out good in a long race.

Stepping briskly into the gritty dust, Spike said, "You better keep right on runnin'. These miners'll string you up if they catch you."

"I'm not going to lose, Spike."

"Figgerin' on me breakin' a leg, or somethin'?"

Mark's answer was as if to himself, "I can't loose." He left the street then, and a few steps on the plank sidewalk brought him to the Chinaman's, where a slim blonde girl with cornflower blue eyes, in a waitresses' white uniform, stood in the door.

"Still betting on me, Pearl?"

Her smile was quick. "On us."

"Sure, on us." That was why Mark couldn't lose. He had bet everything he had, seven hundred and fifty dollars. Doubled, this would buy a house in town. Then Pearl and he would be married.

He turned, frowning, as Spike came toward them. It was common knowledge in Lode City that Spike had fallen hard for Pearl. Mark had often joshed her about it, as the miners had joshed him. But now, seeing the utter devotion in the little man's face, he was not sure it was a joking matter.

"I'm goin' to win for you, Pearl," Spike said, as if he were alone with her.

She smiled uncertainly. "But, Spike—"

"You'll be right with me, every foot of the way. I'm goin' to win for you. Nothin' can stop me." He broke off his steady look at her and stepped into the street.

Mark said, "Looks like I've got two to beat."

She laid a hand on his sleeve. "Don't talk like that. I can't help it if he—well, if he likes me."

He took her hand in his, and the nearness of this girl sent the blood racing like a band of wild colts. "No, he can't be blamed for that. Nobody could."

"How you go on!" But her laugh ended quickly. "Listen, Mark." Pearl freed her hand and began to worry a ringlet of her straw-colored hair. "I heard a drummer talking a while ago. He said Spike is a professional. Saw him win in Butte last year."

Mark did not tell her he had heard a similar rumor. "Don't you worry," he said, leaving. "Next time you see me, I'll be in front of Spike by half a mile."

Pearl said, with quiet assurance, "You'll win, Mark." She added, smiling, "If I didn't think so, would I have bet all my tip money on you?"

It's not only for Pearl and me, Mark

thought, but for most of the miners, too. Tall, lean, narrow in the waist, Mark had always been a good runner. No hound had ever caught him when he was the fox. But that was a long time ago. As he thought back on it, it seemed kind of funny how this race had come about.

It had happened one night in the Nickel Plate. Spike, who had just drifted into Lode City, had let it be known he was a foot racer. After some talk, Tex had offered to bet him a hundred dollars he couldn't beat Mark. One thing had led to another and almost before he knew it, egged on by the miners and with the vision of a town house for Pearl strongly before him, Mark had accepted the challenge. . . .

THE TWISTY street merged gradually with the gulch up whose denuded walls climbed boxlike houses. He trudged on, noting carefully the dips and rises in the rocky road, the cones of talus at its edges, the sharp turns that could pitch a runner viciously. There in the road was Spike, flexing his leg muscles like a prancing horse. And Big Jim Enright, the marshal, and half a dozen other men. A line was scratched across the road.

Big Jim grinned. "Wanter yank off your britches, Mark?"

"Guess not, Jim. I'll need them to hold all the money I'm going to win."

Spike eyed him in cold defiance. "If that's why you're wearin' 'em, you'd better run naked."

"Save your wind, boys." The marshal raised his gun. "Toe the mark."

Spike dropped instantly into the sprinter's starting position, both hands fingered lightly to the earth, right foot shoved back, his body's weight balanced on dug-in toes. He'll be off like a bullet, thought Mark, stooping into a crouch.

The gun roared and Spike was gone before their cheers formed in the men's throats. Straightening from his initial burst of speed, he appeared to glide down the gulch, so smooth and swift was the action of the short legs and the long thighs.

Mark Mueller ran with long, free-swinging strides, breathing slow and deep, his elbows high. This was the way he would do it. Take it easy, but don't let Spike get too big a lead. Then, about three-quarters of the way in, give her the gun.

That first quarter-mile showed him it wasn't to be this way. He was puffing like a leaky bellows, and the heat was getting to him. The July sun, pouring into the gulch, boiled stinging sweat into the corners of his eyes. It baked his widely opened lips. There was Spike, a little farther ahead than the last time Mark had seen him, his short legs pumping with machine-like precision. Then he was gone again.

MARK wondered if the little man was also getting dizzy, if his heart hammered his throat and his thigh bones had turned to red-hot iron. He caught himself cursing Spike, wasting precious air his lungs were crying for. His pounding feet skidded on loose gravel, sparks flying from his boot soles. Panting hard, he forced himself up a short rise. Then the pain knifed his left side, killing pain that sucked his breath.

He stopped, clammy hands pressed to his side, pulling long, sobbing gasps from lung bottom. As soon as the spell was over, he knew, he would have his second wind. The ache still biting him, Mark began to run.

His strides grew longer, swifter. His breathing became regular. But had he already lost the race? The avalanche-scarred slope, marking the halfway point, had been passed. Ahead lay a straight piece of road; it was empty. Mark's boots pounded the gravel. Swinging 'round a shoulder of rock, he saw Spike, a couple of hundred feet ahead.

"Come on, Mark!" he whispered and pulled his knees up faster. People cheered. Faces flashed past.

"Come on, Mark!" That was Pearl. He turned his head, saw her lifted arm, her tight face. And that was all he saw, except the little runner just ahead. "Come on, Mark!"

Spike glanced back. Mark grinned, if the hard slash of his mouth could be called a grin. He surged through a solid wall of

tumult, more savage than human. He was ten feet behind Spike now, now six feet, now abreast of him. Swerving to avoid Spike's thrust-out leg as he passed, Mark saw the raw rage in the man's face. He rocketed his body across the finish line, struck heavily on his shoulder, rolling over and over until stopped by a hitching-post.

A great shouting broke above Mark, sounding far away. Husky miners hoisted him. "Hooray for Mark!"

Mark sank back into the miners' arms gratefully. Letting them toss him from one to another as if he were a ball, he felt the strength begin to flow back into him. He struggled to break away. He must get to Pearl!

He was on his feet when Dutch Schultz waddled out of the Nickel Plate, waving his arms frantically, "Come, qvick!" he screamed. "Tex iss gone mit all de money!"

Quickly the men forgot about Mark. He watched them hurrying to the Nickel Plate, thinking it was no use to follow. Tex had had plenty of time to get away. *Spike is the man I want to talk to.*

Come to think of it, he hadn't seen Spike since passing him. Nor had anyone else noticed what had become of him. The little foot racer had just vanished. There was a flury of excited searching between the buildings, behind them and under them. Convinced that Spike and the bartender were in cahoots, the miners began to talk darkly of a necktie party.

It was left to a nine-year-old boy in steel-toed boots to solve the mystery. "I seen him," the lad said importantly. "He jest kept right on runnin'."

This brought a laugh. "Come on, boys. Let's have a drink." The man laughed louder. "Don't go around lookin' like somebody been kickin' your dog, Mark. You won, didn't you?"

Mark went thoughtfully up the walk to the Chinaman's. This was a hard thing he must tell Pearl. He was worse than broke, because he had borrowed from the bank to bet on himself.

Pearl was not in the restaurant. "She went out the back way soon as the race was over," the other waitress said. "I asked her where she was going in such a big hurry, but she never answered. Took off down that wash, there."

Mark stood looking at her. "Gone, you say?"

"Just like I told you. What's the matter, something wrong?"

"That's what I aim to find out."

AN EVEN two dozen miners followed Mark's swinging stride out of Lode City down the gulch road. Before they had gone a quarter-mile, half of them turned back. Mark, a mining man, couldn't track a wagonload of loose hay across a snowfield. But even he could see where three horses had, a short time ago, waited in the road. His closer look showed him something that turned him cold—a girl's footprint.

Mark covered the track with his foot. He faced the men. "Come on, let's go back and get horses."

The miners looked at one another, uncertain. "Hell!" one of them said. "What'd I look like horsebackin' acrost these mountains after them crooks, when I can make back what I lost in half a day's time? Besides, this is the Fourth of July, and I got some celebratin' to do." He turned back. Three others went with him.

"Come on, fellers," Mark said to the remaining miners. "We've got to hurry." They followed in silence, and Mark noticed that they fell back farther and farther. He stopped and argued with them, but he reached the livery stable alone. Marshal Jim Enright sat in the coolness of the gear room, his chair propped against the wall.

"Just you goin', Mark?"

"Looks like it, don't it?" Mark's answer was short.

"Any other time, I'd go along. But I'm paid just to law the town, and the way the boys are celebratin', I reckon I better stay here." Big Jim added, grinning, "Anyhow, you lost more'n anybody else."

"What you mean?"

"They tell me Pearl went with 'em."

"They tell you a lie!"

The marshal just grinned at him.

As he rode into the street Mark was met

with boisterous laughter. "Better stick to minin' and leave foot racin' alone. You couldn't lose but one way, then." Laughter and jibes followed him down the gulch. He still heard it when he reached the timber, which Pearl had crossed after leaving the wash.

The trail of the three horses soon left the gulch, turning into a long-abandoned corduroy road whose rotting logs climbed through the pines and aspens. It was dark in here, even for early afternoon, only a sprinkle of sunshine reaching the columbines clustered in the forest mold. Mark was close behind them, he knew that. But when he came out of the trees upon a broad sweep of plateau and saw only the mountains and the sky, he had never felt more alone. He pulled from his belt the big Colt he had borrowed from the liveryman, spinning the cylinder with unaccustomed fingers.

The faint tracks led him across an upland bench, down the shoulder of a mountain shot with prospect holes. A white-foaming creek leaped and snarled at the mountain's base, and here the trail was lost. When Mark finally rode out of the thick growth of willows and buckbrush bordering the stream, the sun had slid behind the opposite ridge.

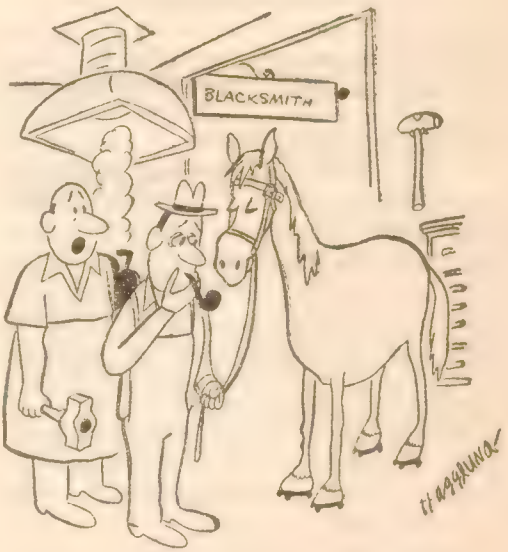
HOPING to pick up the trail on the other side, he put his mount to the racing water, tunneled through the belt of brush. The only tracks he saw were those of deer. Mark did not know this country. There used to be a mining camp over this way. El Dorado. But whether it lay up or down this stream, or across the next range, he could only guess.

He began to climb the mountain, leading the horse. From the crest of the ridge he looked out on an endless expanse of peaks and spires afloat in valleys of purple mist. No mine dump, no stamp mill or aerial tram came within his searching vision. He rode west into the sun.

Suddenly he drew rein, tense, listening. *I must be*— There it was again, little more than a whisper on the summer air. *Organ music! Now, who*— Then he remembered. Pearl had once told him she used to play the organ in Sunday School. Mark strained forward in the stirrups, hand cupped behind ear. The sounds came no more.

Mark wheeled the horse to the south. He was pretty sure the organ music had come from this diretcion. The farther he rode down the slope, though, the more improbable it became that Pearl had been playing the organ. More likely it was the lonely wife of some hard-rock miner, dreaming her dreams of long ago. Well, maybe she could help him.

Riding a long, narrow bench, he came upon an old wagon road that pitched in steep switchbacks down the mountainside. The road, wiped out here by a snowslide's white fury, showed him, in the narrow valley below, a grey chaos of frame buildings, scaffolds and tailings dumps.




***"Sure I put tight shoes on your mare. You know how women are."***

El Dorado he thought, or some other played-out mining camp. These hills were full of them. Cut down all the trees, make the streams eat away the mountains, grub out the gold. Lode City would be like this, one of these days.

He kept on, and presently a trail joined the road. Fresh horse tracks! Might be three horses or half a dozen, but they had gone down this road. He rode cautiously now, watching each turn of the road ahead, and so came down into the ghost town of El Dorado.

What had been the sawmill was a few pieces of rusted iron, a heap of grown-over sawdust. A ragged double row of frame buildings lifted grey, forlorn shapes from the street's sagebrush. A scattering of houses, some leaning for support against a pine or spruce tree, clung to the gulch walls. Just beyond the sawmill were the ruins of a gold mine and the tumbled decay of a stamp mill. Twin iron rails came out of the mine's black mouth, slanting gradually toward the dump for a few feet, to dip sharply and hang twisted in air where the trestle over the creek bed had been torn away by flood.

TYING the horse to an aspen, Mark walked warily into the deserted mining camp. He loosened the gun and, liking the reassuring feel of the curved walnut on his palm, drew the heavy weapon. It was growing dark in this gulch. Already the chill of high-country night seeped through the lengthening shadows. The mine claimed his attention. Must be the El Dorado. Discovered by a Mexican named Gomez, who sold out for twenty thousand. Before the lode pinched out, nearly three million dollars. . . .

"Hold it, Mueller."

The voice was Spike's, and it came from a doorway beside him. For a crazy second, Mark tried to persuade himself that his shot could beat that from the muzzle leveled at his head. The instant passed. "Pearl here?"

"Lay that gun down and walk ahead."

"Now, look here, Spike. Don't be a damned fool!"

A click sounded from the doorway. Mark laid the gun down in the grass and stepped away from it. Spike walked close behind him.

"Is Pearl here?"

"Yes, she's here."

The bitter sharpness in his voice caused Mark to look at him. On Spike's face was the same black frustration, mixed with rage, that Mark had seen when the little foot racer had tried to trip him. "Like her, don't you?"

The Colts' nine-inch barrel jerked impatiently.

"Listen, Spike. I don't know what hold Tex has got on you. But give me back my gun and I'll get Pearl away from him. Then it'll be between us two."

The small, hard eyes studied him. "What makes you think she didn't come here willin'?"

"I know she didn't, that's all."

"Move," Spike said.

Presently there came roaring out of the dusk a man's heavy laughter, followed by the mellow notes of an organ.

"What do you think now, Mueller?"

Mark faced about. "That don't sound like Tex. Who is it?"

"Move!" The bitter voice was charged with menace.

The organ music floated in the silence, strange in this valley of the dead. Pearl was playing *After the Ball Is Over* and playing it well. The man laughed again, a deep and contended sound. Mark cursed silently.

He strode through the gnarled sage, stepped over broken boards and bottles long emptied of their fire. This was it! That wise old diamondback slithering to his hole. Yelling "Rattlesnake!" Mark leaped backward. A wide-flung arm struck Spike, fastened on him. Turning, he crushed Spike to the ground under his body; tore the gun out of his hand.

"Now you get in front!"

Spike got slowly to his feet. There was a tightness at the corners of his mouth. "This won't do you any good."

Mark clubbed the gun. Spike turned and went toward the sound of the organ.

IN THE deepening shadows, some of the buildings sagged in ruin, others stood proud behind their false fronts. Windows stared like eyeless sockets. The music came from a two-story building near the

end of the street. Coming closer, Mark read the faded paint on the façade: Opera House. He forced Spike to a dimly lit window.

Through the dust-yellowed pane he made out the rows of chairs, the small stage, one side of its curtain hanging askew, the other side gone. Tex was sprawled across three chairs, a bottle in his hand, a buckskin sack sitting on the floor bside him. And on the stage Pearl bent over the keys of the organ. Beside her stood a huge man, big and black as a gorilla. In the light of the candle on the organ he gazed at the blonde girl as if for him, the world held nothing more.

"Who's that man?"

"Black Forest."

"Who's he?"

"He figured out this deal for me and Tex. And he took Pearl over," Spike said viciously.

Mark looked again at the big man beside the organ. "Go on in," he told Spike. "I'll be right behind you" he warned.

Spike walked into the weed-littered lobby of the opera house. When he entered the door Mark crouched low behind him. Black Forest merely glanced in this direction. "Let's hear you play *Silver Threads Among the Gold,*" he said softly. "I always liked that one."

Tex took another drink. "Lesh hear the one about Davy Crockett and the Alamo," he mumbled.

When Spike was within ten feet of the stage, Mark whispered, "Duck!" He stood then, calling sharply, "Black Forest!"

The dark man whirled away from the organ, right hand falling to his hip. Straining into the darkness, he stood for a moment uncertain.

"Shoot him while you got a chance!" Spike whispered.

"Raise 'em, Forest," Mark ordered. "Fast!" As the man's hands went up, Mark said, "Get his gun, Pearl."

Pearl sprang up from the stool. "Mark!" She stared, her blue eyes opened wide.

"Get his gun!"

She lifted the gun from Black Forest's holster, holding it awkwardly in both hands.

"Come on down from there, Forest." Mark took a quick look at Tex, who leered drunkenly at him muttering incoherently. The same glance showed Spike's gaze at Pearl, a gaze of pure adoration.

Black Forest stepped down from the stage. The floor shook. "You no-good fool!" he said to Spike.

Spike's smile at him was without mirth.

Mark got behind them now and with his left hand picked up the dust-weighted bag. He prodded Tex with the gun barrel. "Get up!" A raspish snoring came from the sagged-open mouth. "Get up, I say!" Mark struck him hard.

"He's drunk. Been at it all day," Pearl said.

MARK decided to leave him. "Outside," he said, and marched the other two out of the ruined theater into the street. "Turn left and keep going."

The big man and the little man obeyed in silence.

Pearl laughed nervously. "I can't believe this is real. Me with this gun, and these empty old buildings! Mark, I'm so glad you came! I was scared to death."

Black Forest said, "No need to be skeered of me."

"He kipnaped me," she said swiftly. "When I happened to see Tex run out the back way of the Nickel Plate, carrying that sack, I guessed what was up, so I followed him. Soon I saw Spike, up ahead. Then when I came to the horses this Black Forest grabbed me and pulled me up behind him."

"Tell him about me," Spike said, over his shoulder.

"Spike put up a fight for me. They knocked him down. Do you know what? They were coming back and rob the bank as soon as Tex bought the relay horses. That's what they wanted with the foot money race, so they could buy fast horses."

"Look here, feller." Black Forest stopped, wheeling his bulk around. "You've busted in on a big game. Tex and Spike and me, we figger to take that Lode City bank at the right time, when she's loaded

with payroll money. With our relay of good horses, nobody'll ever catch up with us." His mouth, in the semi-darkness, shaped a smile. "How 'bout comin' in as partner?"

Mark said slowly, "So that's why the race was heads I win, tails you lose." He gestured with the gun. "Move on!"

"But you're overlookin' a good bet, Mark." The big hands opened persuasively. "We'll deal you in, fair and square. And you can have the girl."

"Move, I said."

"Better think it over. Where you takin' us, anyhow?"

"You're going to spend the night in that old mine. And tomorrow you're heading back to Lode."

Two behind two in silence except for the crackling of sagebrush, they trod El Dorado's street. The empty buildings, some letting in the sky, marched beside them. Whether it was the spookiness of the ghost town at this time of day, or whether it was imagination, Mark could not rid himself of the feeling that they were being followed. His searching glances to right and left, however, disclosed nothing but things long dead.

"Mark!" Pearl clutched his arm. "Over there behind that building. I saw somebody!"

He looked. He saw nothing that moved. "Nobody here but Tex and he's too drunk to walk."

"All the same. . . ." She continued to look at the building, a store of some kind, its roof and one side wall fallen in, its door hanging to one hinge.

Nothing here," Mark said. They moved on. "Plenty ghosts round here." The shadowy masses of the ruined buildings stalked them. Just beyond the tumbled decay of a livery stable, the train tracks of the El Dorado mine climbed steeply from their twisted wreckage over the creek, to be swallowed in the mine's mouth. Spike and Black Forest stopped before the tunnel.

"Go on in." Mark set down the buckskin bag.

The big man turned slowly. "Now, look here, Mark. Ain't no sense in this. Think of all the money—" His hand struck out, seized Pearl's wrist. He jerked her off her feet as he dived into the mine. Helpless to fire, Mark sprang forward.

PEARL'S voice shrilled her terror. "Mark—behind you!"

He saw the tall, thin shape of Tex, the down-sweeping club in both hands. His sudden shift in position caused the skull-crushing blow to graze his shoulder, the club splintering against the earth. Mark's fist found the flat stomach. The barrel of his gun struck hard on the bowed head. Again he struck, this time flattening the Texan.

He whirled back to the tunnel. A fight was going on in there now between Spike and Black Forest. Mark started into the tube of blackness. He paused to kick aside the gun Pearl had dropped and in that instant heard the grating of wheels on rails. Smothering that sound and the girl's high-pitched scream rang Black Forest's exultant shout:

"I'll show you how to play with me, you fools!"

Out of the mine rolled the ore car Pearl inside it. Reaching out both arms for her, Mark was struck solidly in the middle by Spike's rush. They went down together as Black Forst, crouched behind the ore car like a giant ape, pushed it past them. Turning, he leaped spread-armed at the two men on the ground. Mark fought out his gun in time to fire into the huge body. Twisting aside, he drove in two more bullets. Black Forest lay still.

"Pearl!"

The cry came from Spike. On their feet in almost the same instant, both men raced after the ore car, one on each side of the track. For a short dash they kept abreast, then Spike's flashing short legs pulled him ahead. Running as he never had before, Mark glanced ahead to the break in the track over the creek. It was only a few seconds away, and with each of those precious seconds the car gained frightening speed.

His feet beat the earth like steam-driven hammers. Spike's feet seemed never to

touch earth. The foot racer was abreast of the car now. He leaped upon the track, caught hold of the ore car, swung back on it. The swiftly descending car, without visible slackening of speed, dragged him across the ties.

Bent far forward, elbows and knees furiously digging the air, Mark raced the death car. He caught up with it, passed it, leaped upon the track, flung the weight of his shoulders against the car. The whirring little wheels slowed, but kept turning. They pushed him before them, tie after tie—and there were not many more left, before the rails plunged down into the creek bed.

So steep was the grade that almost the whole weight of the car rested against Mark's chest and hands. Tie by tie, the ore car forced him back. Pearl, her face as white as skimmed milk, suddenly screamed, clamping her eyes shut. Spike, still swinging back on the car, shouted something. His big frame propped like a pole against the iron box, Mark moved backward, tie by tie, and suddenly his foot found no tie, but only air. . . .

"Quick! Get her out!"

Mark had stopped the car. He was holding it by a foot and knee against one wheel, and by the steel of his arms. Spike's knife flashed as he cut loose the girl's belt-tied feet. He pulled her over the side of the car. Straining every muscle, Mark pushed the dead weight a few inches up the rails and leaped clear.

The ore car rolled past him, turned a somersault in the air and crashed into the creek bed.

Two trembling right hands came together in firm grasp, but neither man spoke.

Pearl said, "Words don't count for much in a time like this. I just want you to know, Spike, that Mark and I will never forget you."

The little foot racer smiled. "If Mark don't mind," he said, "I won't forget you, either."

"I won't mind," Mark said. "And to show you I mean it, I want you to be best man at our wedding when we get back to Lode."

## RAILS RE-ROUTE IN MEMORIAM

**A COVERED WAGON caravan setting out from Nauvoo, Illinois, in the spring of 1852 bore the Winters family—Hiram, Rebecca, and their five children—toward the Great Salt Lake Mormon colony. But the trek was too long and arduous for Mrs. Winters. She died in the North Platte Valley, three miles east of the present town of Scottsbluff in southwestern Nebraska, and was buried there.**

**For nearly fifty years only a wagon tire, with her name cut into it, marked the lone prairie grave. Buffalo herds swept over it. Indians regarded it with superstitious awe. Then the section became a cattle range, but no cowboy molested that landmark.**

**In 1899, P. T. Darrow, chief engineer of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, was surveying the valley for a rail route. He found the old iron hoop jutting roughly in an oval shape from the grass-grown mound. After studying the historic marker, he ordered his men to retrace their steps. Going back about a mile, they changed the railroad's course by a few feet so it would not cut across the tumulus.**

**Thus he preserved one of the very few known graves of the 20,000 or so pioneers who died between 1846 and 1855 on the old Mormon Trail. The figure is based on records compiled by a granddaughter of Mrs. Winters, Mrs. Augusta Winters Grant, one-time president of the Church of Latter Day Saints, who spent years in compiling a roster of emigrants who perished en route to Utah.**

**In 1900 the railroad company built an iron fence around the grave. Two years later, without disturbing the rusted wagon tire, descendants of Mrs. Winters set up a granite tombstone on the spot, with this epitaph:**

**"In memory of Rebecca Burdeck, wife of Hiram Winters. She died a faithful Latter Day Saint, Aug. 15, 1852, aged 50 years. While making that memorable journey across the plains with her people to find a new home in the far distant Salt Lake Valley, she gave her life for her faith. Her reward will be according to her works. This monument was erected in 1902, her centennial year, by her numerous descendants in Utah.**

**"And should we die before our journey's through,**
**Happy day, all is well!**
**We then are free from toil and sorrow, too;**
**With the just we shall dwell."**

**——*Freeman H. Hubbard***

# Tighe Miller's Ghost

*By Sally Lockhart*

*Was he going to blow the dam?*

*The way to Bill's heart, Jule learned, was rugged*

JULE WORDEN woke to the shout of "Fire!" Scrambling from her bed to the red-tinged window, she could see the sawmill, left her by Uncle Ed, a raging molten mass of flame.

Superintendent Charlie Foy was pounding on the office door, and Jule shouted at him, "All right. I'm coming."

Five minutes later, with her slender figure clad in flannel shirt and riding breeches, she stood a-shiver on the office porch, realizing there was nothing left, and nothing she could do about it.

Jule's hands pushed back the crow's-wing hair that sprang away from her wide white forehead, and her teeth clamped hard on her soft red lips. Things had been bad enough before. Now, no matter what Bill Downing had to say, she was simply going to have to sell. Though perhaps that out-

fit down in Taos, that had been so anxious to buy her timber, wouldn't want it now with the sawmill gone.

Well, she'd call Bill, anyhow. As a lawyer just starting out in the little town of Chimney Rock, Bill was as broke as Jule, herself. But he was very good at bucking one up, and that was something she needed very much just now.

The telephone, strung on trees and fence-posts for twenty miles, was out, as usual, when she tried to call. All Jule could do was send Bill word by one of the millhands, when they started leaving.

It seemed an endless time till Bill arrived at four o'clock. But just watching him as he crossed the yard, shoulders swinging, fair head high, made Jule's heart feel lighter.

Her words of greeting were wry, however. "Well, only the timber's left. Very pretty, and the shade is nice, but unfortunately I like to eat."

"Gosh, I'm sorry." Bill's eyes affirmed it as he gripped her hands. "What happened, Jule? A slab-pit spark? Or was someone careless?"

"Foy says he's certain the fire was set; that it started blazing from end to end. But that's only guesswork in my opinion."

"I dunno," Bill answered, his eyelids narrowed. "Where there's smoke, there's fire—though right now, I reckon, that metaphor is in plumb bad taste."

"Well, anyhow, I'm broke." Jule shrugged. "If anybody wants the place they can have it. I'll go back to Denver and forget this ever happened."

Bill didn't answer. He had gone to gaze through the office window.

Perched sidewise on her uncle's desk, Jule reviewed the last four weeks. It had started with her uncle's letter, written on his dying bed and arriving in the mail with the lawyer's notice of his death.

Jule had known her Uncle Ed so little she couldn't feel great grief at his passing. And his letter had carried an exciting message:

"You're my only living relative," it had said, "so I'm glad to leave you well fixed for life. I can't tell you more about it, now. But make no plans to sell the place till you've seen my lawyer, J. D. Holcomb, in Chimney Rock."

WHAT Lawyer Holcomb had to say was something Jule had never learned. On her arrival at Chimney Rock, she'd learned from his widow that J. D. had died of a heart attack just one week after her uncle's passing.

Widow Holcomb, a spare and grey-faced woman, had shaken her head at Jule's arrival. "You're very foolish, my dear," she said, "giving up a good safe job for that run-down place Ed Worden left. You could never make a living off it. I'd sell it fast, was I you."

She only shook her head again when Jule told her what had been written in her uncle's letter.

"That idea of you getting rich was just an old man's crazy notion. Joe would tell you that, if he was here. The new young lawyer will say so, too. He's taken over all Joe's cases, and it's him you're going to have to see."

By the time Jule reached Bill Downing's office she was feeling very low. At first Bill agreed with Mrs. Holcomb about the mill, but later he completely switched. That was after they had found the note, and the paper with it Bill called a map, in Ed Worden's safe-deposit box.

The note said, "Jule—you've learned from Holcomb about the value of the place I'm leaving. But I think it best that only you should have the balance of the information, which an educated girl like you can very easy figure out from the sheet of paper I'm enclosing."

The sheet enclosed didn't mean a thing to Jule, nor to Bill Downing either. There were wavy lines across the top, and underneath, drawn side by side, what looked to Jule like a cattle brand. Double Triangle T, it could have been. And between the brands were some cryptic letters and lines and figures.

"I'm sure my uncle was never rich, and you can waste a lifetime on myths like this," she said to Bill. "I'll settle for the mill and the timber."

SHE'D found the mill a one-horse outfit that would barely pay for bread and butter, just like the Widow Holcomb said. When the letter came from the lumber outfit down in Taos, making what seemed a decent offer, Jule felt she really ought to sell.

But Bill, optimistic, urged, "Hold on. We'll maybe ferret that paper out, discover what the old man meant, and make their thirty thousand look like fifty cents."

Jule had no faith at all in that. But she liked it here, and she felt much more than a client's interest in Bill Downing. She agreed to wait. A second offer, and then a third, didn't budge her decision.

Those rising offers had strengthened Bill in his contention that she shouldn't sell. Now, turning from his contemplation of the blackened mill yard, he crossed the office and perched with Jule on the time-scarred desk.

"Jule," he said, "when you got those letters from that lumber outfit, offering twice what this place is worth, I thought it had a fishy smell. So I did a little private snooping, and just yesterday I got back word that Miller Lumber has been defunct for the past ten years, and old Tighe Miller dead for six. Right on top of that, you send down word that the sawmill's burned. It stinks to heaven."

Jule's blue eyes widened. "But we had their letters—the name on the letter head. And even if it was a hoax, what has the sawmill burning got to do with that?"

"It's simple as two and two," Bill said. "Someone else is in on your uncle's secret. Someone, maybe, in Chimney Rock, who used that defunct outfit as a cover-up. They don't know about that paper, see, that was in the safe-deposit box. And they figure, with the sawmill gone, you'll no longer want to keep the place."

"Oh, that paper! Quit harping, Bill. No one would do a thing like that. And anyhow we have no proof that the fire was set."

"Well, the fact remains that the sawmill's gone and Miller Lumber out of business. And I'd like to bet you a thousand bucks you'll get another offer soon. From old man Miller's ghost, no doubt," Bill added on a savage note.

"Well," Jule said, "if Tighe Miller's ghost still wants the place, I might arrange a meeting with him."

"Which mightn't be a bad idea," Bill agreed. Then his voice went pleading, almost tender. "Listen, Jule, don't give this up. Don't go away. You might be sorry all your life. And I know I would," he added bleakly.

It was that that did it. Jule knew right then she was going to stick just as long as she could. "All right," she told him. "Just tell me how I'm going to live."

BILL had already thought that out. "Cut logs and pile 'em on the skidway here, agree that you'll rebuild next spring, and I'm sure the bank at Chimney Rock will advance the money to see you through."

It sounded hopeful. "We'd better talk to Foy," Jule said.

The superintendent, a weatherbeaten, tight-lipped man, "hmm'd" a little when they explained. "You'd make enough to pay the bank, all right, but there'd be nothin' left for you," he said.

"But wait a minute. Best stand of timber's on the northwest section. That's too far to haul to the skidway, here. Away last fall your Uncle Ed took and built himself a dam on the Muddy River, up that way. Had a water shortage the year before, and he figured with a good sized pond of run-off water on the place he'd be sittin' pretty.

"He never had to use it, though. So what I'm thinkin' now, Miss Jule, is to cut that section and store the logs on that pond, up yonder. Lease some land near town, on the lower Muddy, and build a little jerry mill. Then, come spring, with the water high, float down your logs, and cut 'em out at a tidy profit."

Jule was smiling, and her eyes were bright. If the bank would ante, this meant another lease on life. It meant she could stay, at least, till summer. By then a lot of things could happen, things not connected with cryptic letters.

She got the loan from the bank, all right. And, shortly after, they started cutting in the northwest section, snaking the logs by horse and mule and a second-hand donkey engine to the holding pond on the Muddy River.

Bill was disappointed, Jule was sure, when they received no further offer from the bogus Miller Lumber outfit. He didn't talk about it, though. And very greatly to Jule's delight she felt Bill's interest in her growing as the weeks went by.

With winter coming, Bill wanted her to move to town. And Mrs. Holcomb, whom Jule often saw, gave her a standing invitation. Jule, however, had never cottoned to the dry and weazened little woman with bright eyes peeping from wrinkled lids like enterprising but frightened mice. Besides, she liked it in the woods, and going out each day to the section where the men were cutting, she saw with pleasure how the pond was filling with the new-cut logs.

THEN a hard blow fell. The Muddy Valley Ranchers' Association threatened suit against the impounding of river water behind the dam Jule was using. All summer, they said, there'd been some fear that the dam might break and flood their fields on the lower reaches. Now men were planting their winter wheat, and they felt the flood danger had been increased by the storage of so many logs, which would cause pressure on the dirt embankment.

They demanded a slow release of impounded water, so it would carry safely past their fields. And in just as long as it took to read their letter Jule saw her hopes for survival melting. With her stranded logs in an empty lake, she'd be not only broke, but deep in debt to the bank as well.

Bill, when she told him, was foaming mad. He was disheartened, too, feeling there was little chance of preventing the ranchers from taking action. For the first time in weeks Bill spoke of the letter.

"If you'll let me take that paper to Denver, Jule—find some expert who can read it—it might save you going on the rocks."

"No," Jule told him, her soft lips stubborn. "You have no money for jaunts like that, and I'm sure I haven't." And for the first time she began to wonder what made Bill so anxious to find the wealth he still believed was on her place. Could it be Bill wanted to see if she'd be rich before he popped the question she so longed to hear? It was a miserable, disrupting thought.

They quit cutting logs. On Bill's advice, Jule was letting the ranchers bring their case to district court when it next convened. Meanwhile she was marking time.

Bill went to Denver, and Jule would have bet her Sunday hat he had taken the paper with him. He got back on a Monday morning. Jule had spent the night in town and was walking down the street with Mrs. Holcomb when they met Bill coming from the railroad station.

"You look like the well known cat," Jule said, "that found the door of the birdcage open."

"Yep," he told her, and his grin was wide. "A very succulent morsel, too. I got a lot of information. And, in addition, I got the loan of fifty trucks from a friend of mine. They'll be up here Wednesday, and a week from then they'll have the logs from the holding pond snaked out and hauled to your new mill-set. It means we can let that lawsuit drop, and it'll give us time that we're going to need."

JULE'S jaw flopped open. "Well," she said, and was going to add, "you took a good deal on yourself." But she thought of the sharp-eyed Widow Holcomb. It was the widow who asked the question that was on Jule's tongue.

"Time for what, for goodness' sake?"

"Oh," Bill muttered, "nothing. Just to horse around."

And Jule said quickly, "I must get up home. So long, both. I'll see you later."

Bill overtook her at the livery stable. "Jule, don't hate me, please," he begged. "I know you have no faith in there being anything valuable here. Then this thing came up about the dam, and I couldn't just

stand by and see you go bankrupt. So I took that paper down to Denver, got the thing translated, and it does make sense."

"What?" Jule asked, unable to stifle her lifting interest.

"Well, it's a map, all right," Bill said. "Those figures and numbers, this fellow claims, stand for one of these new-fangled ores—uranium and something else. The way I figure, your Uncle Ed found this ore on his land somewhere, then didn't have the time or strength to do much about it. He told his lawyer about the find, and Holcomb was to tell you. Then he left this map to guide you to it.

"This fellow that I took it to thinks those things that look like brands are pine trees, and the wavy lines a mountain top. He thinks if we find a pair of trees, and sighting through them spot a ridge, we'll find this outcrop of precious ore. Then you'll really be rich for life."

"And you, as well," Jule told him stiffly. They'd just as well have the matter clear. "There'll be a whopping lawyer's fee—and well deserved—if it's really true."

She believed it, now, he was after money. Bill's eyes, too, had lost their sparkle. Had she hurt him by that last remark? Well, he'd hurt her, too, so they were even. Then, thinking of the logs, she said, "You were very thoughtful to work things out so I could stay till the ore is found."

Then she had to get away from Bill, had to get up home where she could do some thinking.

She spent a restless night. And next day, saddling her mare, she set out for a long and lonely ride. Since her hand on the rein was lax, it was natural that the mare should head in the direction they had gone so often in the last two months.

They were on a little rise of land that gave first view of the holding pond lying many feet below in the emerald cup of its pine-ringed basin, before she realized where the mare had brought her. All activity at the pond had ceased, but by Wednesday it would change again with arrival of Bill's diesel trucks.

Jule told herself that she should feel more grateful.

A MAN Jule didn't recognize, though he had a familiar look, had left his horse at the timber's edge, near the holding pond. He was taking from behind his saddle what looked to Jule like a pick and shovel and a small square box. He was heading with them toward the dam. He was going down below it now, sloshing through the autumn trickle in the rocky stream-bed, halting close to the earth embankment.

Jule's eyes were popping. What was in that box, dynamite, she asked herself. Was the fellow going to blow the dam?

But that was ridiculous. No one but her and the valley ranchers had any interest in the dam. And the last thing either of them wanted was for all that water to go down at once—scattering what precious logs didn't shatter on the rocks; flooding the new-ploughed fields below. Yet, sure as sunrise, that was what the fellow planned.

Her instinct was to ride on down. Yet very likely the man was armed, and she realized that would be foolish. She had to stop him some other way.

Bill, she thought. She had to get Bill here at once.

She spun her mount and, bending low beneath whipping branches, headed for the Muddy River trail, which would be her shortest route to town. She hit the trail a few miles down and was hardly on it when she saw a rider coming up and recognized no other than the Widow Holcomb.

"Why, Mrs. Holcomb, what on earth?" she gasped. "I didn't even know you rode." Yet crowding over her surprise was a quick resentment of this delay.

The widow had been exclaiming, too. "Jule, good gracious, I never dreamed I'd meet you here." Then she bridled at Jule's remark. "Well, I'm hardly in my dotage yet. I was fetching something—" And then she stopped, her grey cheeks flushed as she finished stiffly, "fetching lunch for a picnic in the woods."

That hesitation and little pause clicked a trigger inside Jule's head. Fetching something—but it wasn't lunch. Belatedly, Jule realized that the man she'd seen at the dam

above was Lew Dodds, the Widow Holcomb's brother. Dodds was a valley rancher, and sympathetic, his sister said, with her dilemma about the pond. So why would he want to blow the dam?

Jule almost spoke her thought aloud. Then something stopped her. The widow's probing look, perhaps, or the sense of fear that gripped Jule's throat, knowing that the woman lied.

"What brings you over this direction?" Mrs. Holcomb asked her. "I understood you'd stopped your cutting, and this ain't your shortest route to town."

There was furtiveness and fear, Jule thought, in those little, peering, winking eyes. *She's going up to Lew, all right, and she's afraid I've seen him,* Jule decided. *I've got to hurry and get away, and I mustn't let her know I guess.*

"I was simply taking an aimless ride, then decided I would go to town and this trail was closest," Jule explained. Then she added with a forced politeness, "Have a pleasant picnic," and reined her horse around the woman.

HEADED down the trail again, Jule knew she'd been too optimistic in thinking she could ride to town and get Bill back to the dam in time. She had thought of phoning from the mill, which was closer by a good half-hour, but the line had been out again, and she didn't know whether Foy had fixed it. Now she realized she must take that chance.

When Jule reached the mill, a half-hour later, luck was with her. The phone was working, and Bill not far from its other end.

Jule knew she must be cautious, for she could be wrong about the dam, and others might be listening in. Answering Bill's deep hello, she said, "Listen, Bill. Something's happened, and I need your help. Meet me just below the dam on the Muddy trail."

It was like Bill that he didn't press her for information. "All right," he told her. "I'll be there pronto."

It would be another hour, however, before Bill could make it. Jule, keyed up to fever-pitch, decided to go on ahead and observe Dodds' progress at the Muddy dam.

Absorbed in getting word to Bill, she hadn't tried to figure out Dodds' motivation for his sabotage. Now, she decided, Lew was simply acting as his sister's tool. The Widow Holcomb must be the undercover, prospective buyer of her timberland.

Mrs. Holcomb, Jule presumed, had heard Ed Worden tell her husband of the find he'd made. Not knowing of Ed Worden's letter and the information he'd left for Jule, she must have figured, when her husband died, that Worden's secret was hers alone. All she'd have to do was buy the timber and locate the ore. Jule remembered how the widow had urged disposal of the "worthless place."

Except for Bill, that might have worked. But it hadn't. So the mill was burned. That was to make Jule want to sell, just as Bill had reasoned. The stirring-up of the valley ranchers, the threatened lawsuit, and now destruction of the dam itself, must have had the same objective. The widow, learning that the holding pond would be clear of logs in another week, hadn't wasted any time.

Some of the details might be wrong, but Jule felt certain of the guilty party. She was certain, too, that Bill would come in time to stop them at their dirty work. And once more reaching the Muddy trail, she pushed along it at an easy pace.

The warning that she'd played it wrong came to her first as a moaning sound and a sudden greyness showing dimly through the trees ahead. That puzzled her. For all her being a rancher's daughter Jule had never seen a stream in flood. And not till the moaning was a roar and the greyness grew to a towering wall of white-topped water rushing with tremendous force toward her down the trail did she recognize it for what it was.

In the next awful moment, the water struck, and she and the mare were underneath it. There were logs there, too, spinning, leaping, striking rocks with a crack like doom. And doom it was, Jule had no doubt.

SWEPT to the surface of the rushing flood, she saw the body of her horse turning over like an empty barrel. Just as dreadful was a man's black hat caught grotesquely in a huge tree branch that pitched on the churning water.

Lew Dodds had worn a hat like that. Jule, however, had no time to think about it, carried under for the second time, gagged and choking on muddy water, eardrums pounding, chest constricted, and legs like two huge leaden weights.

There wasn't any hope, Jule knew, as she struggled vainly against the flood. The iron band that grew tight and tighter about her waist was just one more anguish to be endured, one more misery to make death sweet.

Then she was lying on sodden grass, and Bill's voice was saying, somewhere above her, "She'll do, I think. She's breathing even now, thank God."

"Nice work!" Another booming voice. "I'd not have bet a bogus dime on either one of you reachin' shore. Could have knocked me over, anyhow, when I seen that flood in the Little Muddy. Thought them valley ranchers was simply nuts figurin' that dam might bust."

Jule's voice was very faint and small, and it took some forcing to bring it up, but she said now faintly, "Bill—Bill."

Bill's answer was joyful. "Jule, darling! Then you are all right!" He bent above her, and the relief that lit his tired lined face made her happy. Then thought of what might have happened to the Widow Holcomb and Dodds made her shudder. That black hat—it could have meant Dodds was caught in the flood.

Clearer thought told Jule that the Widow Holcomb and her brother, having planned the blowing up of the dam, must have also laid plans to get away. No doubt they were on their way to town on some back trail, getting ready to pretend surprise when the news of the flood broke.

And yet she couldn't be sure. In spite of everything, Jule felt she had to look. It took some arguing, but finally, half dried, they started up the trail in the sheriff's jeep. Though she kept her eyes so intently on the flooded banks that Bill gave her puzzled looks, Jule saw no sign of either of them. She decided she'd probably been a softie to come back all the way up here when she could have gone back to home and comfort.

She supposed she could tell the sheriff about seeing Widow Holcomb and Dodds, but it would be her word against theirs. And she was tired enough now not to care about their getting away with their depredations.

THE DAM her Uncle Ed had built, she saw, was completely ruined. Most of the logs the dam had berthed had been carried downward on the flood, to meet a splintered and shattered end, or lie isolated on the river's banks. But a few still lay in the muddy flat where the lake had been.

In the middle the lake had been quite deep. Two fair-sized trees that stood together had been submerged by the backed-up water. Jule, looking for a different thing, had scarcely seen them till Bill inquired in a tight-held voice, "Make you think of something, those two trees? Guess I better go and take a look."

Jule remembered then about the map and those queer triangles the man in Denver had thought were trees. There were mountain ridges, too, off a ways, but not, she thought, where you could see them from between those pines. Bill was going to be disappointed.

He didn't look so, though, as he started back. Leaving her seat Jule went to meet him.

"Nope," Bill said, "that isn't it. And I can't be sorry—though I ought to be. Listen, Jule, I swore I'd never tell you this while you had the prospect of being rich, and me just a new beginning lawyer. But you're as busted now as you'll ever be, and may never find that ore at all. Anyhow, when here today I nearly lost you I knew I had to tell you I love you—and always will. That's all there is to say, I guess."

Joy could hurt almost as much as pain, and knowing you'd been wrong be heaven.

"Not all, Bill." Jule's voice was pleading. "I love you, too. And even though there's something else—"

She didn't finish what she'd meant to say. Minutes later, coming out of Bill's embrace flushed and happy and satisfied with everything the way it was, she hated to say it. Before she did, she made Bill promise it would make no difference in things between them.

"Bill," she told him, "I may be rich. Just standing here it occurred to me that those wavy lines on my uncle's map weren't meant for mountain tops at all. I think they're water, with the trees beneath, and this uranium ore between. I think my uncle found it there and built the dam to keep it safe from prying eyes. And he figured I was a whole lot smarter than I really am."

She laid her fingers against Bill's lips and pulled his tense arms close again. "Remember what you promised, Bill. If it's true, it's just a stroke of luck. And, after all, I wouldn't be here if you hadn't saved me from the flood."

After quite a while, Bill could grin again. "Whoever blew that dam," he said, "meant to hurt you and helped instead. You said you saw him. Who was it, did it, Jule?"

Her enemies had lost, and they hadn't done her any damage. She was too happy to be vindictive. Slowly she shook her head, smiled and said, "I think it was Tighe Miller's ghost. But I'm sure he'll never walk again. So let's just leave it that way, Bill."

And Bill was willing, as he held her close.

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***Coming up in the next issue***

***Two Magazine-Length Novels***

*Rider for Boot Hill*

***Though Tom Andrews' promise had been strong enough to take him from Montana to New Mexico, it couldn't warn him of the rough going ahead***

**By JOSEPH CHADWICK**

***and***

*My Love Rode West*

***The love Sabra found was not the love she'd started out to meet when the Frontier Express puffed its way out of its safe Eastern terminal***

**By WALKER A. TOMPKINS**

***also***

*One Last Prank*

***A short story of a pretty girl, of two cowboys whose pranks were harmless, and of one man who played the game by a different set of rules***

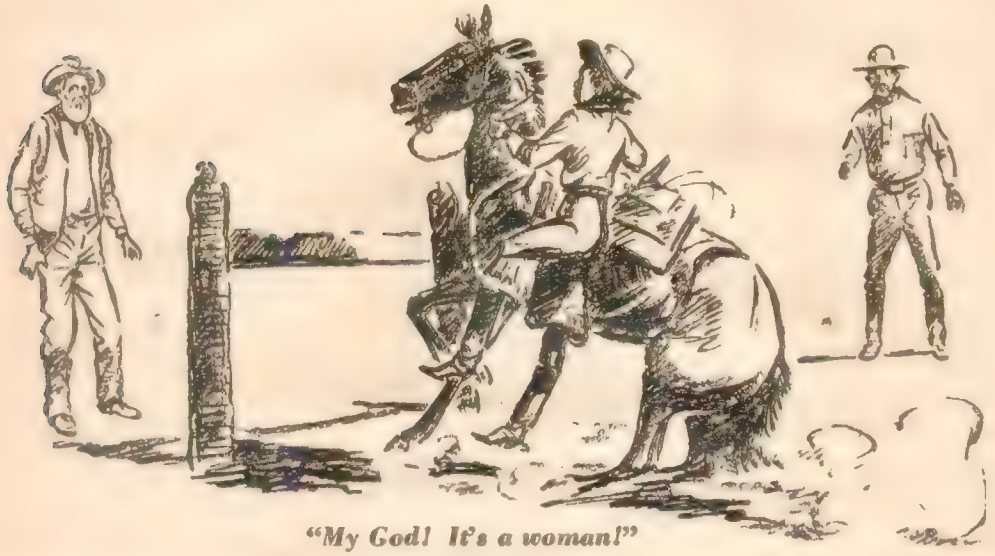
**By ELSA BARKER**

***Also a Novelette, Many More Short Stories and Two True Stories in the Bigger***

**RANCH ROMANCES**

# Lillie, the Firemen's Darling

*By Maymie R. Krythe*



*"My God! It's a woman!"*

*A true story of a girl who gave San Francisco much of its zest for lively living*

THE TIME was October 17, 1905, the place the mountains of Lebanon in Asia Minor. The action—several Americans are returning on horseback from Damascus. Suddenly one of the party—a woman of sixty-two but still a gay and spirited personality—reins in her horse. She has just remembered something important. After taking a bottle of champagne from her luggage, she asks the guide to cool it in the mountain snow. Then Lillie Hitchcock Coit, though far from her beloved San Francisco, drinks a toast, on their anniversary, to her life-long friends, the members of San Francisco's Knickerbocker Volunteer Fire Company, No. 5.

Loyalty was one of Lillie's best characteristics, and she displayed it to her city and to her friends from the time she arrived there as a child of eight in 1851, all through the years when she grew up with this temperamental town, until her death there in 1929.

Lillie Hitchcock was born in 1844 at West Point, where her father was an Army surgeon. Her earliest days were Army years. She knew soldiers and Indians at military posts in Florida and South Carolina until her father was appointed Army Medical Director for the Pacific Coast. Then Dr. Hitchcock brought his wife and daughter to California by sea.

In those hectic Gold Rush days there were not many children in San Francisco. So instead of going to school, Lillie was taught by her mother at home. Lillie was a bright child who learned fast. She was also

good at getting what she wanted. Once when her parents sent her to a convent in San Jose, Lillie refused to eat for four days. Then her parents relented and took her home again.

She was seventeen when the Civil War broke out. Things were lively in California, where many Southern sympathizers lived. Her father (from Maryland, a border state) was absolutely loyal to the Army he had served so long. But her mother, born in Virginia, had many relatives in the Confederate Army.

Lillie always went whole-heartedly into any cause she adopted. Consequently she took up the Southern issue with all the energy of her young being. She helped several young Southerners escape so they could join the Confederate Army. This frightened her father, who sent her and her mother off to Paris.

But Lillie had no sooner reached that city than she began to use her expert knowledge of French to aid the Secessionists. She became chief translator for the Confederacy. For two years she had charge of all correspondence between the French Government and the South—a very important job for a girl not yet out of her teens. Because of this work the American minister would not receive Lillie and her mother. But Empress Eugénie of France took a fancy to the clever young girl and had her invited to many court functions.

WHEN mother and daughter returned to San Francisco in 1863, Lillie threw herself completely into another cause, to which she had been devoted since childhood—the work of Knickerbocker Volunteer Fire Company No. 5.

In the early days, buildings in San Francisco were of flimsy materials, and several times the town was swept by disastrous fires. Because of this constant menace, it was considered the duty of all citizens to fight fires, and several volunteer groups were organized. They were composed of rich and poor, professional men and tradesmen; and there was strong rivalry between companies as to which could get its engine first to the scene of a fire.

Near the Hitchcocks' hotel was the engine house of the Knickerbocker Company. Naturally Lillie and the other children idolized the firemen in their fine uniforms —red shirts, black trousers, high boots, and black patent leather helmets. Sometimes the bellman would let a child ring the bell to summon the volunteers. The story goes that Lillie Hitchcock was the firemen's favorite and was most frequently allowed to sound the alarm. Sometimes, as she grew older, she even helped pull the engine when it stalled on its way up a hill. She soon became the company's mascot. There was nothing she enjoyed more than dashing to a fire to encourage her fire-fighting friends.

Because of her loyalty to Company No. 5, they gave her a special badge in 1863 and made her their Honorary Member. Lillie took her duties very seriously, one of which was to attend every daytime fire.

No matter whether she was dressed in her best, at a dinner or ball, when the bell sounded she'd rush out to her waiting carriage. At once the coachman would gallop the horses to the fire. Soon Lillie would have pushed her way to the front line of spectators and be cheering No. 5 in its efforts to beat its rivals.

One story that San Franciscans have never forgotten is about the time Lillie had been rehearsing, in her bridesmaid's gown, for a wedding at Grace Cathedral. At the sound of the alarm she rushed from the church, hailed a passing victoria and had the driver rush her to the scene. When she arrived, she saw that No. 5 and Monumental No. 6 were both trying to put out the flames with streams of water from their hand-pumped engines.

Lillie got into the midst of things and shouted encouraging words to her friends. A man in the other company got satirical and called her a "sissy" and a "featherbedder." This was too much for one of the members of No. 5. He turned his hose on Lillie to prove she wasn't a sissy. Lillie was game, and stood there and took it. This bit of courage endeared her more than ever to No. 5, which always worked harder and fought longer when Lillie was on hand.

If a fire occurred at night, she had to keep a light burning in her hotel room until the men had returned and put the engine away, or else she would be fined. Often when the fire-fighters had had a long fight, she'd have a hot supper sent to them. When the company took part in a parade, Lillie either rode on the engine or stood at her hotel window, dressed in her uniform, waving her red handkerchief as they passed proudly by. She always wore her gold No. 5 pin day and night, and it was buried with her. The numeral was also embroidered on her clothes and worked into the lace of her fans. She signed herself: Lillie Hitchcock (later Coit)—5.

*Lillie idolized the firemen*

WHILE she was still a young schoolgirl, her parents and friends smiled at her rushing to fires. But when she was old enough to come out in society, the Hitchcocks thought it was high time for her to give up this tomboyish amusement. Her father made the rule that every time Lillie went to a fire, she would have to take her maid and then spend two weeks' penance at their Napa Valley ranch. But this didn't bother her; she kept on going to fires, took her rural vacation, and when in town again repeated the process. Finally Dr. Hitchcock had to give up in despair. As far as fires were concerned, Lillie was incurable.

After San Francisco established a paid fire department in 1866, these volunteer companies still kept their organization and flourished as social clubs. With the retirement of their famous No. 5 engine, the Knickerbockers held annual banquets, usually at the Palace Hotel, for which Lillie made the arrangements and furnished the table decorations.

It was a proud night for Lillie Hitchcock Coit, in 1888, when the members presented her with a gold brooch in the shape of a miniature helmet and set with a diamond. On the accompanying scroll were these words:

> The company being desirous of testifying their gratitude for the love and devotion manifested by you on all occasions since childhood days, beg leave to present to you the accompanying testimonial as a memento of the esteem and undying friendship the members hold toward you as a lady and as an honorable member of Knickerbocker Company No. 5.

When the time for toasts came at these annual banquets, Lillie appeared in her uniform—a black skirt, red shirt, black tie and belt, and carrying her helmet. After the toast to all their lady friends came the

special one, "To our Lillie." If she was away from the city on October 17, Lillie always sent the company a message.

As a young woman Lillie was vivacious, and attractive. Her hair and eyes were dark, her mouth and chin firm. Before she was twenty she had been engaged to at least fifteen young men. At twenty-four she married Benjamin Howard Coit, a wealthy citizen who held a responsible position at the Mining Exchange. Although fond of sports, he was a high-strung man. When he'd come home exhausted and not want to talk to any one, Lillie would drive him around until his nerves quieted down.

They were popular in San Francisco society, but Lillie did not intend to settle down to a humdrum existence just because she was married. Besides entering into her husband's interests, she continued her own. It wasn't easy for her rather conventional husband to live with her when, for example, she'd rush off gaily to a fire or change the color of her hair. When she'd grown tired of her brown locks, she used champagne—so the story goes—to bleach her hair. When her husband objected to this, Lillie shaved it off and bought three wigs, of different colors, which she wore to match her costumes.

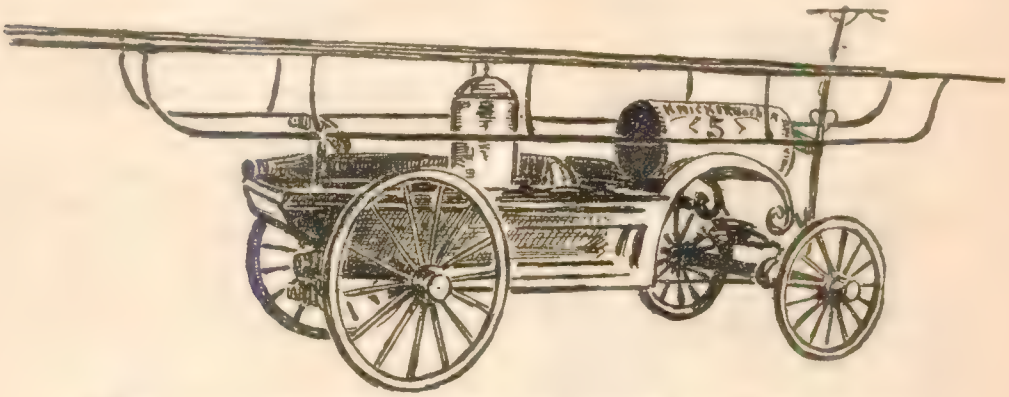
Mr. Coit finally decided that a trip around the world might calm her down, but of course it didn't. Not suited to each other, the Coits finally separated, but neither obtained a divorce. They remained friends until Mr. Coit's death in 1885 when he left her his entire fortune.

NO MATTER what unconventional things Lillie did, no gossip was ever directed against her. For instance, she once went each day, for several months, to a men's club not open to women and read to an old friend. She declared that he was lonely and needed her. As someone has said, Lillie was really "a great lady who dared to be herself."

She was a gourmet, a beautiful dancer, a fine whip, an expert rider and shot, and a champion poker player. At her ranch, when riding her favorite hunter, she used short skirts. Once when Lillie dismounted at a country store, a man stared at her, not believing his eyes, and said, "My God! It's a woman!"

Once she was seen at a cock fight dressed in men's clothes. On another occasion Lillie entertained a group in her suite at the Palace Hotel with a prizefight, Gentleman Jim Corbett being one of the participants. Then it was an unheard-of thing for a lady to go to such a contest.

Even as a child she was known for her courage. When walking along some dunes a bullet whizzed past her. At once Lillie ran to the top to see who had done the shooting. Later at the Napa ranch, a burglar climbed onto the porch roof. She saw him, got her rifle, stepped out of the window, and was just going to shoot in his




***When Coit Tower was dedicated, old Engine No. 5 was present***

direction when he made a hasty exit.

To the end of her life Lillie Hitchcock Coit was a friend of firemen and helped any who needed assistance. When she died in 1929 firemen stood guard at the funeral establishment and marched in the procession to Grace Cathedral. Three of the four survivors of Volunteer Company No. 5 served as a special guard of honor.

No one, perhaps, ever loved San Francisco as much as Lillie did. She tried to buy Telegraph Hill, in order to give it to the city; but a group of public-minded citizens had just done that. In her will she left one-third of her estate to the city supervisors "to expend in an appropriate manner for the purpose of adding to the beauty of said city which I have always loved."

After much discussion about the memorial it was decided to build a cylindrical tower on Telegraph Hill. It stands 540 feet above sea level and is named Coit Tower in her honor. Winding stairs and an elevator lead to the top which gives its visitors the wide sweep of San Francisco's beautiful harbor.

On October 8, 1933, when Coit Tower was dedicated, old Fire Engine No. 5 was present, with Lillie's helmet and belt lying on it. Years before it had been sold to Carson City, then bought by some of Lillie's friends and placed in a museum. Now, for the last time, it was dragged up the hill where Lillie had played as a child, a fitting symbol of those days when she'd been the firemen's darling.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# OUT OF THE CHUTES

IT'S HIGH TIME—before 1950 runs out on us—for RR to salute one of the grandest guys in rodeo, Producer Leo J. Cremer, on his 25th anniversary in the business.

Year in and year out, Cremer puts on big shows and little ones, mostly in the Northwest (but he's brought his stock as far east as St. Paul and Omaha and as far south as Baton Rouge). And nobody can give luck much credit for Leo's success.

Ever since he started in rodeo he's had strong ideas and new ones about producing shows. He was the first man, for instance, to use big buckers. In his string nowadays he never has a saddle bronc that weighs less than 1250 pounds.

Cowboys today like to ride Cremer's big stock. They know his horses are tough ones—the kind you'll win on if you can stay aboard. But years ago it was a different story. Leo tells of one cowboy who

took a look and said, "Why don't you hitch those plugs to a plow where they belong?"

That cowboy should have saved his breath for riding, because neither he nor any of the other boys made a qualified ride on Leo's "plugs" that day.

He spends a lot of time finding the best rodeo stock available, taking in the little amateur shows. When he finds a horse that the cowboys in those parts won't ride any more, he adds it to his own string. He always has about 300 buckers, and his turnover is about 150 a year.

He admits that his own ranch crew once proved smarter than he at picking a bucker, though whether the boys were hard-headed or soft-hearted is doubtful.

The story is that Madame Queen, one of Leo's great bareback broncs, had a foal, a spindly, wobbly little fellow that hung around the ranch after he was weaned and became quite a pet. The cowboys were always running into him unexpectedly, so they named him Peek-A-Boo and thought they were spoiling him with all the petting he got.

It looked that way to Leo, too. When Peek-A-Boo was a two-year-old and still undersized, he decided to get rid of him.

"Boys," he said, "we're not going to feed a horse on this ranch unless he'll fit into the bucking string. Let's cut the colt out and sell him and not carry him another winter."

The cowboys did as they were told, but later that day they secretly turned him back on the range, where he ran for another year.

The next time the boss saw the colt he was a three-year-old, and a strapping, big strong one. Leo still didn't think much of Peek-A-Boo's prospects as a bucker, but decided to give him a try. The result: one horse practically turning inside out, one rider bucked onto the ground.

Peek-A-Boo's name is now Village Inn, and in three years as a saddle bronc he was ridden three times.

"It just goes to prove," says Leo, "that bucking horses are born, not made."

Every year at Big Timber, Mont.,

(which is Cremer's home town and which he represents in the State Senate) he holds a tryout rodeo for his new buckers. It's very popular with the top-hands, because it gives them a chance to get a line on what they'll have to cope with on the rodeo circuit that year. Last year there were 129 entries in saddle bronc-riding alone.

Cremer knows that it takes more than salty stock to make a good rodeo. He was the first person to add special acts to his rodeo, which almost every show in the country does now.

He believes in telling the audience as much as possible about what they're seeing, and before the show he gives his announcer, Gene Payne, all the dope he can about his stock.

"A pleased crowd," he says, "is one that understands everything that's going on."

The Cremer rodeos have the reputation of being the fastest in the country, and that's because Leo believes in careful rehearsals for split-second timing.

Even his horse, Murphy, a dark palomino he bought for $37, knows what's expected of him. With his boss on his back, Murphy is calm and quiet outside the arena until he hears the announcer start to introduce the producer. Then he tightens up, but waits until he hears "Leo Cremer" over the PA system. That's his cue, and he knows it. Into the ring he gallops, proudly carrying his master to receive the applause.

FROM Jerry Armstrong, whose first-hand rodeo profiles you've read in this column before, comes the following account of one of the bright lights of feminine rodeo. Take it away, Jerry. . . .

The latest recruit and a sensational performer at Girls' Rodeo Association shows is Wilma Standard. Wilma, "The Texas Tomboy," is however no green pea in rodeo arenas. She could almost be classed as a veteran. Wilma is short in years but long in rodeo experience.

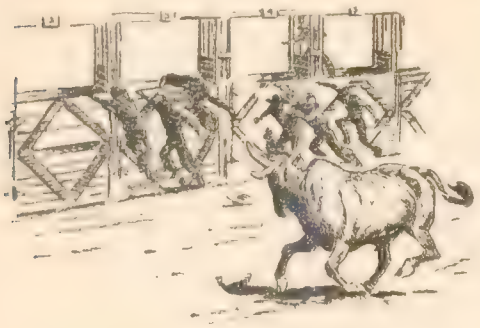
The Texas Tomboy was a girl champion roper back in 1945. That year the C.A.A. (Cowboys' Ass'n of America) innovated cowgirl calf-roping contests at their approved rodeos. Wilma participated in twenty calf-roping contests that season and was never out of the money. She racked up sixteen wins, three seconds and one third. I don't know of any male roper, past or present, who can equal that record for consistent top form roping. Along with calf-roping, Wilma is currently roping steers, trick riding and putting on a four-horse Roman ride and jumping exhibition.

In the past she has been a bronc-rider,

a hazer, a pickup man (or girl), and a rodeo producer. In 1947, Wilma was co-producer of several all-girl contests in California. The first was held on the Sawtelle Government Hospital grounds and put on for the entertainment of hospitalized veterans. To say this show was a success is putting it mildly; the veterans practically tore down the stands. It was this cowgirl's intention to take this all-girl rodeo outfit on the veteran hospital circuit, but the promised financial backing failed to show.

Wilma was born in Texas, but in 1937 the family left the Lone Star for southern California. Here the tomboy started roping in local practice arenas and breaking and training colts. Then she went to work handling and trucking stock for Heavy Ray, a rodeo stock contractor. Through 1945 she worked for Heavy and was active in C.A.A. girl calf-roping contests. The spring of '46 Wilma loaded her good self-trained roping horse, Sonny, into a one-horse trailer hooked onto the rear of her car—a car of rather ancient vintage and temperamental behavior—and set out in search of fame and fortune.

Wilma and Sonny rodeoed in Texas, all over the Middlewest and finished the



season at the Eastern contests. She had started that season as a calf-roper, but by July she was riding buckers, trick riding and building a reputation as a pickup man. A fast, efficient pickup man can, on those occasions when something goes wrong, literally be a life saver. Wilma, who is five foot five and weighs around 125 pounds, was rated so highly at this he-mannish chore that at a Kansas contest the riders averred there would be no rodeo unless the Texas Tomboy was performing the bronc-riding pickup stint.

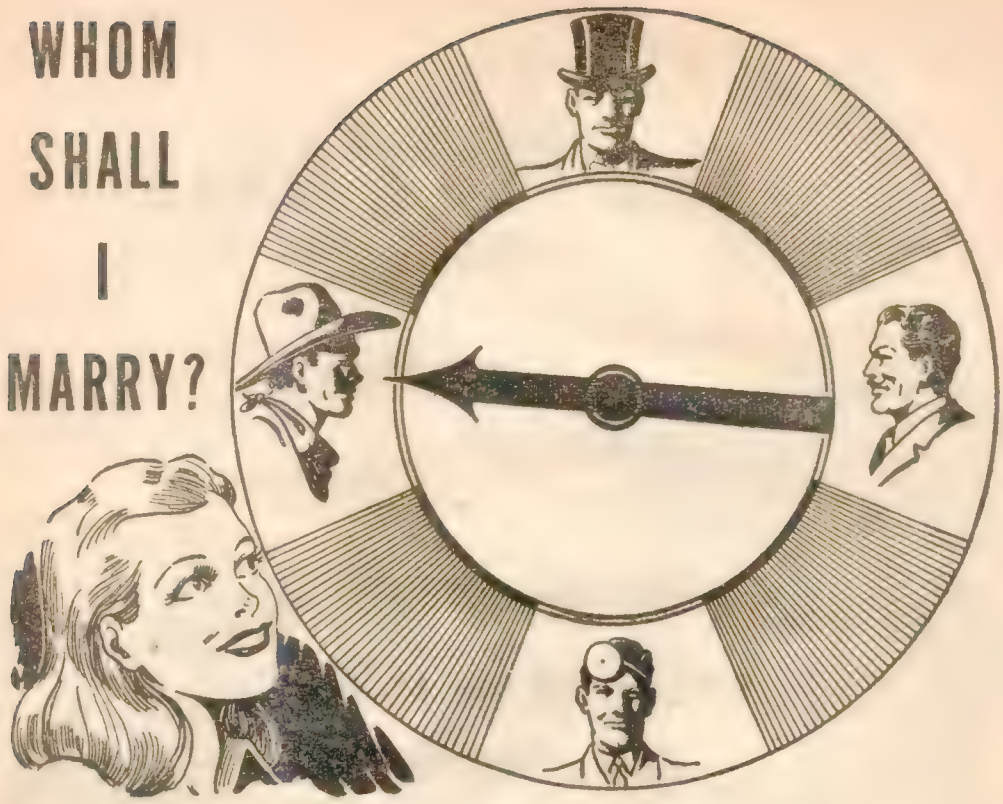
The summer of 1948, Wilma was injured in a spectacular spill, suffering a head injury that necessitated a long siege in the hospital. The following season, Wilma and her horse, Sonny, were active in Western horse show arenas again. Here the handsome, versatile Sonny collected a number of ribbons in show stock-horse contests. Then the mount was kicked by a rival equine, and this calamity put Wilma afoot and Sonny in temporary retirement. This spring, Wilma, her cowgirl friend bronc-rider Rae Beach, and four horses—including the recuperated and now fat and sassy Sonny—moved from California to Texas. All are now active at G.R.A. and other rodeos in the Southwest.

Out of rodeo arenas, the Texas Tomboy is a tailor, specializing in form-fitting

snap-button Western style shirts. A large number of the dressy rodeo cowboys and cowgirls are wearers of Wilma's Western tailored clothes. Wilma's own wardrobe is an ever growing awesome collection of bright-colored, glove-fitting trousers, shirts, blouses and jackets. With her sombrero set at a rakish angle the Texas Tomboy at all times cuts an attractive figure. The rodeo bug has really bitten this gal. She wouldn't be happy, she says, doing anything else. But she does like to cook, to dance and is a movie fan and record collector. When old and grey, Wilma plans on retiring to a little ranch of her own—where she can raise many horses and dogs and write her autobiography. It should be quite a book!

*Adios,* THE EDITORS

# WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



***By Professor Marcus Mari***

***Man of Sagittarius*** ***Nov. 23 to Dec. 22***

WINSTON CHURCHILL is the most prominent of current men born under this Sign of the Archer, the ninth of the zodiac. Mark Twain, Fred Astaire and Donald Woods are other Sagittarians. Men of this sign are determined, sincere, honest and ambitious. They have a flair for dramatizing themselves, whether they become leaders in public life or retire, as they often do, to a sheltered, quiet world. Many ministers and missionaries are Sagittarians. They are the men who believe in and fight for a cause, who enjoy facing heavy odds, who don't know the meaning of fear. Even ridicule spurs them on.

They have a sharp artistic appreciation. This makes them tend to be drawn to esthetic, often delicate women. They detest coarseness, and the girl who marries a Sagittarian will be wise never to let down the veil of mystery that surrounds her in his eyes. She should be gentle rather than forthrightly outspoken, quiet rather than tempestuous, and perfectly willing that he be the master of the house.

As long as he is the master, he will be an ardent lover. He devotes himself to the girl he finally chooses with the same intensity and devotion that he gives to the work or cause he espouses.

This single-mindedness usually takes the Sagittarian man far in his line of work. He's not afraid of radical changes and will drive himself relentlessly at a job he likes. His honesty and sincerity give him a warm charm, and both men and women admire him deeply.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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# DREAR HERITAGE

*By Lloid Jones*

*It was Maxine, shotgun level*

**THE STORY SO FAR:**

CLAG DENGALLS, determined to rebuild the family Bar D, wins back the ranch from wheat mogul TRACY WOEK in a poker game. Then he had the other cattlemen of the country band together as Vigilantes to run out the wheat men, who are plowing up the sod and exposing the range to dust.

Clag's methods are so tough that he alienates LORRIE TALBOT, daughter of local rancher BILL TALBOT and the girl Clag has long loved. Lonely and disturbed, he is attracted to red-haired restaurant keeper MAXINE FARLEY, who is thought to be Woek's girl.

There comes the time when Clag finds it hard to control the violent impulses of his cohorts. Dengalls becomes a trouble town, with wheat-leggers also crowding Woek's wheat interests.

While things are boiling to a head, Clag is ambushed, tied behind the wheel of a moving truck and sent down the road toward a deep wash.

**CONCLUSION**

CLAG LAY on his belly along the truck seat, panting, and heaved with all his strength, warned by increasing jolts that he was gaining speed. He had a minute yet, maybe two.

His muscles corded, sweat poured from him as he tried to bring his feet up to his hands behind his back. The approach to the bridge was rough. No chance of the truck riding across the bridge. A truck this size was stable enough so that it wouldn't leave the highway until it reached the bridge and the ten-foot drop into the gully.

Then suddenly Clag had rope in his hands! His back muscles gave under the strain, but he clung to the rope as his feet came down. And came free!

No time for amazement. He floundered upright and stamped on the foot brake. And the truck was stopped.

Clag sat gulping for air, every muscle quivering. He leaned forward, with no thought except to hold the brake tight. His still bound hands felt rope again. Reflexively he pulled.

His hands came free. As if the short lengths of rope had been tied in bow-knots. He dragged fiercely at the hand brake and cut the motor, sat limply slumped over the wheel, supporting himself by it, trying to steady his muscles and his mind.

"It just don't make sense," he said loudly, finally. His own voice was a reassuring sound in his ears, evidence that he actually was still alive. He looked up. The bridge was a vague shape in the darkness, a good hundred yards away.

The pre-dawn wind sprang up, whistling about the cab, and he rolled down the window for more air. After a minute he rolled it up again, to shut out the dust.

He sat considering what to do next. He rolled a cigarette, partly as further reassurance that he was still all there. His first impulse was to put as much distance as possible between himself and that damned truck. But he was maybe five miles from Calliwaw, over forty from home. Thing to do was drive on. It would be good day by the time he reached Calliwaw.

He tried the motor, experimented with the complex gear shift. Gingerly he eased the great vehicle across the bridge, finally got her rolling. Dust boiled up from the huge tires and rolled with him, a hot grey fog in the August dawn.

Shock began to give way to fury, at the hell of those minutes when the truck had been carrying him inexorably to death or ghastly injury. He recalled the brutal skull-cracking he had taken at the Bar D. Last night he'd held Tooley back, even considered trying Lorrie's way. He cursed himself aloud for a fool.

Abruptly a wild yowl behind and at his left made him jump violently. He stared around, not understanding. A car was hanging alongside him, siren screaming, a red blinker light flashing. A bull voice yelled, "Stop!"

Clag turned to the unfamiliar controls. Then a shot crashed in the night, and the bullet slammed off the steel cab.

Clank shrank himself down, switched off the ignition and yanked at the hand brake. There was a hiss as the air took hold and the truck slithered and ground to a halt.

"Come out of there careful!" shouted the same heavy voice. And aside, "You, Donley, put up that gun. If there's any shootin' needed, I'll do it."

DONLEY! And the big voice was Sheriff Paul Tatum. Clag leaped from the truck. "Paul," he yelled, "am I glad to see you!"

"Clag Dengalls!" exclaimed Tatum. "I'll be a son of a gun!"

"You're damn right it's Clag Dengalls!" Clag snarled. "And just let me get my hands on—"

"Hold it, Clag. You're under arrest."

"Arrest! Why, you—"

"You're drivin' a load of wheat stolen earlier tonight from Tracy Woek's place," Tatum said coldly. "The other two leggers were caught on the spot, and I've already sent 'em under guard to the county seat. But I suppose you know that."

"Why—" Clag turned to stare at the truck, understanding now why it had looked familiar to him. It was the same truck the vigilantes had caught loading.

"It was while we were taking the other two to town and calling you, Sheriff, that the truck was driven off," Tracey Woek's voice said smoothly. "Which made it clear there was a third wheatlegger. We didn't know it was Dengalls, of course."

"Why, you dirty, low-down—"

"Shut up!" Tatum ordered harshly. "This is not a herd of cattle, and I *can* prove you was drivin' it. Get in the car."

As Clag moved forward Tatum roughly snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

"Now don't get any fool ideas," he advised. "Charley," he added to a deputy, "you drive that truck in. It's evidence."

Clag sank down hopelessly on the car seat. It made sense now! The loose-tied ropes. The talk that revealed their plans. If the truck crashed, okay. It would look like an accident while he was driving a truckload of stolen wheat. If he saved himself, they had him on the wheat charge. The latter was more to Woek's taste. Make an example of Clag. Take folks' minds off the drouth and the dust. Yes, this was probably the way Woek preferred it.

Only, Clag had some charges of his own.

"Paul," he said, "I was carried, hogtied and gagged, in a car to about here. Then I was thrown in that truck and left to roll into the gully. There ought to be tracks."

"Probably are," grunted the sheriff. "Anything to show who made 'em, or when, or doin' what?"

"There's ropes in that truck cab I was tied with," Clag declared.

"Or that was used to haul some car out of the ditch," retorted Tatum. "In the last month you've pulled enough stuff which I haven't been able to pin on you. All I want is something that'll stick."

Clag made no answer. Plainly no use talking to Tatum.

"And if you're griped because I haven't got Woek too," the lawman went on, "relax. I'll get him if there's any more shovin' people around in the Dengalls community!"

"Why," said Woek from the back seat, "everything was under control here until Dengalls started his campaign to crowd me out and make room for the revived Bar D."

"That's so," Tatum admitted. "You've headed yourself straight for the pen, Clag, and it makes me sick. You come of an old, respected family, and you've got a natural leadership about you that you could have used to do a lot of good for this country."

"Now," Clag said bitterly, "Woek is free to go ahead and make a desert out of the country."

THE WIND, still freshening, caught up a scud of dust from a plowed field and sent it fogging across the road, forcing Tatum to slow for lack of visibility.

"Damn the country!" Woek muttered. "You make such an all-fired fuss about these cursed dry flats. Anybody with any sense will take what he can from it and get out."

"It happens to be home to some people," Tatum said stiffly. "And that soil could still be handled, if it was given proper attention."

The rest of the drive to the town of Dengalls was made in hard silence. Clag tried to clear his throbbing head, tried time after useless time to think of some way to get the truth of this business brought out. Maybe he needed a good lawyer.

It was six-thirty when they finally drove into Dengalls and stopped. Tatum said, "I want a cup of coffee. Come on, Clag." He led the way towards Maxine's tent.

"Come on, Mick," Woek said, a chuckle in his voice, and the two followed.

The restaurant was full—men in mechanics' caps, in straw hats, in the eternal bib overalls, in heavy shoes. Not a Stetson or a pair of boots in the lot. Cattle men and wheat men didn't eat together here, not any more. They looked up and saw the sheriff, saw Clag stalking rigid-faced before him, and the eating stopped. A little rustle stirred around the tent.

Maxine was at the cash register, her face set and not pleasant. A thin haze of dust was inside the tent, and the canvas rippled with the rising wind outside. Then she saw them.

"Well," she said, "the big one didn't get away."

"Coffee," said Paul Tatum. "Without conversation."

Tracy Woek chuckled again. "Another man's wheat is one man's poison," he cracked.

Maxine set a cup of coffee in front of Clag. He raised it, perforce, in both hands.

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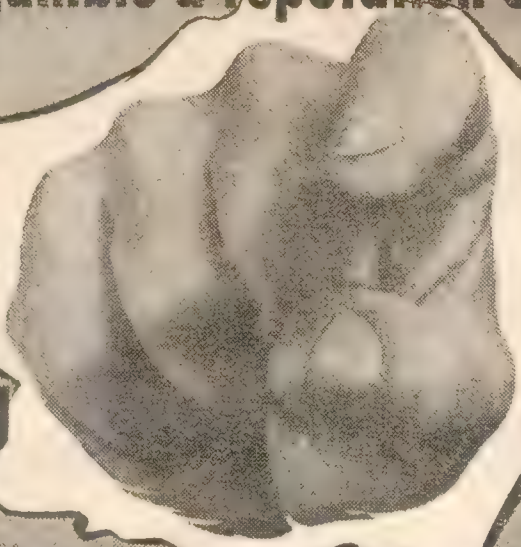

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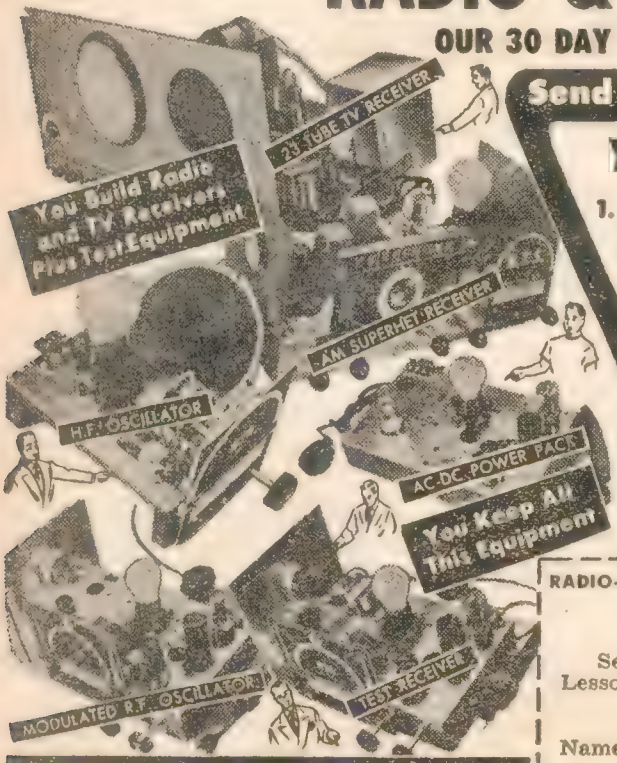
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"You shouldn't have played poker," she said, "without me around."

A chorus of guffaws rose from the breakfasting wheat men. Their voices lifted in a clamor of attempted wise-cracks and jeers. Paul Tatum stood and turned to face them.

"Any of you got remarks to make about my prisoner," his voice cut through the clamor, "come to the trial. For now, shut up!"

But Maxine had given Clag an idea. He whirled on his stool. "Paul, listen," he said. "At the time that wheat was—"

The tent flap rose and fell, and Lorrie Talbot stood there with her father. She looked around until her eyes found Clag.

"Clag," she cried, "what's happened?"

After a moment he raised his manacled hands in silence.

"But what did you do?" demanded the girl. "Dad took me over to the Bar D first thing this morning. I . . . said some things I guess I shouldn't have last night. But we only found your hat and gunbelt on the floor inside the door. We came on to town to see what had become of you."

Tracy Woek said, "Last night between ten and eleven a load of wheat was stolen from my place. A while ago the sheriff overtook the truck not far from Calliwaw. Dengalls was driving it."

"Oh, Clag!" she breathed.

Clag said to Tatum, "Ask her when and where we talked last night."

"Oh!" cried Lorrie. "Mr. Tatum, Clag was at my house last night till after eleven. He couldn't have taken the wheat!"

There was a slow minute of silence. Then Tatum said, "I got to the scene no later than eleven, and the truck was gone then. But still, he *was* driving it, Lorrie."

WOEK SAID tightly, "I'll withdraw the charge, Sheriff."

"Now look here!" Tatum shouted.

"It's no use trying to prove a case against him if he's got an alibi rigged," Woek said harshly. "He could cook up any sort of cock-and-bull story about how he came to be in that truck, and no doubt produce equally reliable witnesses to substantiate it."

"I don't like your hint, Woek," Bill Talbot said flatly. "I saw Clag come to my place about nine-thirty last night. It was past eleven when he left. I talked with him, and so did my daughter."

Maxine said quietly, "I guess your poker goes all right without me."

"We were talking about the drouth and the dust," Lorrie added as a convincer. "We ended up quarreling about whether big cattle ranches or cooperative soil management was better for the country."

"That's the trouble," Maxine observed. "He goes with the country, and the country goes with him. Dust and all. You're welcome to both, kitten." And Clag failed to realize the significance of Lorrie's high color.

Woek said, "I won't prosecute him, Sheriff."

Paul Tatum slammed his hat on a stool. "Damn you both!" he shouted. "You think you've got your own little private war over here, and you're beyond the law! Well, let me tell you somethin'! The next time I get a report of so much as a dogfight within twenty miles of this stink hole, I'm comin' over here and run the whole goddamn lot of you in! I'll hold you ten days for disturbin' the peace by wearin' a gun—I'd do that now if Clag had his on. And I'll pinch you for vagrancy the minute you walk out the court-house door! I'll put a stop to this cock-eyed racket if that cussed jail gets so full you have to sleep standin' up!"

He yanked a ring of keys from his pocket, jerked the handcuffs off Clag, and stalked out, the plank floor shaking.

In a moment they heard the blast of his car motor.

Nobody in the tent said anything for a minute. Clag rubbed his wrists reflectively.

Then Bill Talbot looked around at the hard-eyed crowd. "We'll drive you home, Clag," he offered.

That broke the spell. A man called out, "Lost your guts, Woek?"

And another shouted, "Dengalls don't leave this place!"

CHAIRS scraped on the planks, banged as they overturned. The crowd came to its feet, milling, surging forward.

"String 'em both up!" came a yell. "Then we'll have peace!"

"Hell with that sheriff!"

"Not tellin' me where to go or what to do!"

They howled forward with that terrifying, faceless menace of a mob. Clag leaped in front of Lorrie.

Then they stopped, short. Clag glanced aside. Mick Donley was standing spread-legged, gun drawn, beside Woek. Across the counter at Woek's other side, Maxine had laid her shotgun.

"I don't think you want me, boys," Woek said steadily. "You can have Dengalls."

"That," said a new voice, "I doubt."

Clag risked a quick look at the entrance. Jack Porter was standing just inside the flap, a sixgun level at his waist.

"Move, Jack," Clag said, "so nobody comes in behind you."

"I don't know what this is all about," Porter began. "I spent the night in town, you know. Somebody said you was here."

"I'll tell you what it's all about," Clag answered, raising his voice. "It's about that dust storm coming on out there."

"Excitement's a little late," Porter commented bitterly. "This is August. Be a rare day we don't have a high, hot wind. The dirt'll roll, boys, but you buzzards should 'a' thought of that before you followed Woek's lead like so many blattin' sheep after a ram with a silver dollar for his bell clapper."

"That's why we've been trying to get rid of you wheat men," Clag added, "but that won't stop the dust. Nothing you'd do to me would stop it, either."

There was a moment of silence. Then someone called, "So you want us to pull out and leave the country to you."

"No," Clag said promptly. "At first I did, but I was wrong." He was surprised, himself, at his words. "What I want is to throw in with you. Go together to buy the right kind of machinery. Divide the area up so we'll have pasture amongst the

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*(Answers to the questions on page 79)*

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3. *Feliz Navidad* (fay-LEES nah-vee-DAHD) means Merry Christmas. *Casa grande* (CAH-sah GRAHN-day) means big house and is cowboy slang for the residence of the ranch owner or boss. *Baile* (BY-lay) means a dance.

4. Blue denim riding pants.

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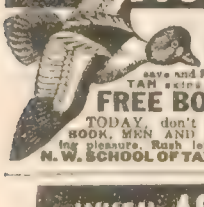

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plowed fields, and no cultivated stretch so big we can't hold it against wind erosion."

Woek said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "You can sell off your tractors and one-ways and combines. Maybe Dengalls will find you a nice team of horses to buy, for a suitable commission, of course. You ought to clear a dollar an acre a year, easy."

"There'd be a living for us all," Clag declared. "No sudden wealth, but the boom's over anyway, like it or not."

"Horse cholera!" Woek snorted. "I've heard that yipping ever since I came to this country. 'Oh, the dirt will start blowing! Oh, we'll never have moisture for another crop!' Hell, I've been here five years, and we've always had moisture, sooner or later. We'll get it again if we've got the spine to hold out."

"No moisture yet," somebody said, "and it's plantin' time a'ready."

"What's wrong with Dengalls' idea?" asked another man.

"You wanta live on these goddamn flats all your life?" snapped a third. "If this is the bust, I'm takin' what I've got and clearin' out. Where I can breathe, for a change."

"That," put in Maxine Farley, "was the most evidence of brains I've heard yet."

"That was your woman, Woek. You feel the same way?"

"The country's made money for me," Woek answered. "It'll do the same for you, if you've got the guts to take it."

"The country made you money?" inquired Clag. "Or was it the store, and the Sunset Bar, and the elevator? That elevator was a big investment, and it might not pay off if the big-scale wheat operations were cut down."

"I made the investment," Woek shot back. "I believe in the country. Seems you don't."

"My people have lived here for over eighty years," Clag bit out. "Nothing can save this country now unless everybody in it takes part in an organized effort to save it. Too big for you or me, Woek."

"Dengalls makes sense to me."

"Hell, we'll get moisture! I'm goin' ahead and plant."

"Not today, you're not."

"That's right. Can't work in a dirt storm like we're in for today. Why don't we get as many as we can together in here and talk over what we might do?"

Clag said, "If you decide to tackle it, count Bar D in. I'll be there."

THEY MADE no move to stop him as he walked out, followed by the Talbots and Jack Porter. The wind had risen to a howling force, hot sandpaper to the skin. They walked, heads bent, Lorrie holding her skirts, toward the Talbot car.

"Lorrie," Clag said, "I—you saved me from the pen, I guess. I don't know how to say thanks."

"You just said it, didn't you?" she returned. "What means most to me is the change in you."

"Better enjoy that, Clag," advised Jack Porter, as they came to the car. "There's others won't feel so delighted."

Clag looked at him sharply.

Jack said, "There's another meeting called. At the Bar D."

Clag turned from the car. "Got an extra horse?" he asked. "Or some other way I can get there without endangering the Talbots?"

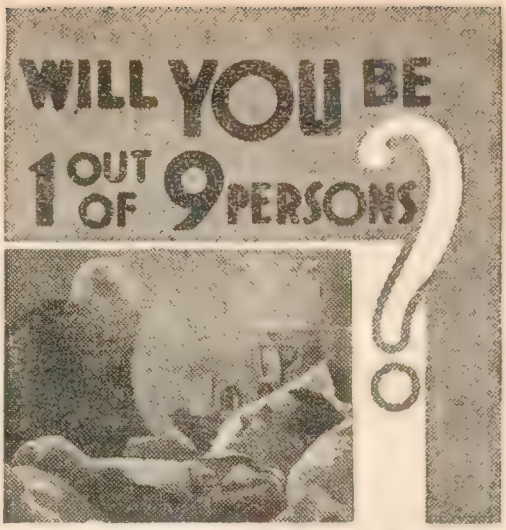
Lorrie said, "What's wrong?"

Not to alarm her, Clag said, "Some matters of policy."

"The vigilance committee?" she guessed. "They'll feel you're betraying the natives and going over to the outsiders."

"Jack can vouch that the come-latelys would've lynched me except for him," Clag pointed out. "The outsiders'll remember my past attentions, too. Besides, my idea won't have much appeal for 'em after Woek gets in a few words about sixty bushels of wheat and fifty dollars' profit to the acre."

"In other words," Lorrie concluded, "you're now the enemy of both sides. I didn't see that when I tried to talk you over. But this idea is right, Clag, no matter who's against us. Together we can face—"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"No," said Clag, "it's my own doing. The vigilance had gone too far for me. And a day like this makes you see one man can't fight the dust alone. You're not responsible."

Angry color came to her cheeks. "In fact, I'm not even included! I guess you haven't changed so much!"

"We better hire a hall," said Porter. "Mick Donley and two others just came out of Maxine's."

"Let's go, Dad," Lorrie entered the car and banged the door.

Bill Talbot said, "Thanks, Clag, for keeping her out of it. You watch yourself."

Clag nodded and stood looking after them, Lorrie sitting very straight beside her father, looking very straight ahead.

"This is a poor place to stand, Clag," Jack Porter said quietly, "with Mick Donley on the loose. My coupe's up at the folks'."

Clag followed him. The world seemed unreal. The light, though it was yet early in the morning, had a solid, yellowish cast, as at sunset. The wind whistled and moaned, sounds that seemed to come from a great distance. And the ceaseless, changeless hiss and lash of the thin sand through the air and along the ground beat upon the senses so that a man's mind was deadened to all else.

They got in Porter's car and pulled into the street, the headlights turned on so they could be seen by other vehicles. A giant tumbleweed, the dried, round Russian thistle, raced up the street ahead of them, rolling like a giant hoop with occasional unbelievably long leaps.

Jack said presently, "You didn't stay for the wheat men's meeting on account of you don't think they'll take to your plan?"

"No excitement to soil control," Clag returned. "No big profits. No whopping acreages."

"Then you don't actually believe that business about all working together and stopping the dust?"

"Of course I believe it!" Clag snapped. "It'd work, if people'd work. You think I

was stringin' 'em?"

"No," said Porter hastily. "No. I was only tryin' to get straight in my own mind."

JACK HAD a point, Clag saw. Porter, and those others out at the Bar D, would want to know what he intended to do if he disbanded them. Clag would have told him, if he could.

They found the entire force of natives in the ranch house, seated about the big old parlor where Claghorne Dengalls I had entertained at dances folks traveled a day and a night and a day to attend. Clag entered and stopped beside the door to the little office from which the old man had ruled his cattle kingdom.

Tooley was tilted back in a chair against the opposite wall. Clag felt uncomfortably bare among these men without his cartridge belt and gun. He said, still not knowing what to say, "What's on your mind, boys?"

Tooley took the cigarette from his mouth and let out smoke before he answered. "You."

Clag said, "Still want to speak the piece you started last night?"

Tooley shook his head. He'd already spoke his piece, Clag guessed. Tooley stated, "When we begun this, you said we'd run the wheat men out, or they'd run us out. Changed?"

Clag had to answer now. "The dust," he said, "will run us all out if it's not stopped."

"The dust," Tooley said with a thin-lipped smile, "comes from plowin' up grass. To stop the dust, you stop the plowin'. To stop the plowin', you run off the plowboys. That was so plain we never even mentioned it."

Clag nodded. "Only we begun too late. The sod's already busted. The dust's already blowin'. No use houndin' the sodbusters now."

"Then you intend to quit? Let 'em have it?"

"No. I intend to try and organize with 'em to handle the land against dust. I was talkin' with a bunch of 'em at Maxine's a while ago."


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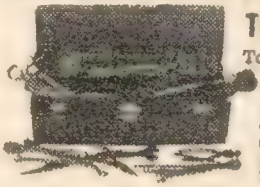

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## LLOID JONES

The announcement was greeted by profound silence. Finally Tass Munger said, "Wonder you didn't get yourself shot."

"Would," asknowledged Clag, "if it hadn't been for Jack."

"Some," said Porter, "could see Clag's point before we left, I think. They sent out for more to talk it over and maybe lay plans."

"Woek see it?" Tooley asked ironically.

"We figure," said Porter, "Woek sent Mickey Donley after the goons, to see the meeting didn't get out of hand."

"It's nice," said Tooley, "you let us know."

"Meaning what?"

"When you need land for Bar D, you organize us. When you need soil control around Bar D, you organize wheat-growers. That works fine—for Bar D."

It hit Clag, then, the reason for his gloom, his feeling of loss, his groping. Ever since he could remember, Bar D had been his one dream. The grandfather he'd never known, but for whom he was named, had been Buffalo Bill and Stonewall Jackson and Paul Bunyan all rolled into one for Clag. He had scorned his father for losing Bar D, and never known any ambition in life but to restore it in all its power and its glory. He had planned that Lorrie should be its queen. and his young man's dreams had been filled with grand thoughts.

It was as if now he had torn a part of himself out and thrown it away. There would be no big Bar D but only a modest ranch among other modest ranches. They would be little people together, with every acre meaning something dear to them. Lorrie had said that. Only he'd left Lorrie out of this when he'd refused to let her come with him out here.

Tooley rose now, and Clag tensed. Tooley looked around, something significant in his glance. "I guess we'll be goin'," he said. "Come on, guys."

"Where you going?" asked Clag.

"Out to organize a grange!" Tooley rasped. "You want to be president of it?"

They followed him, slowly, most of them

not looking at Clag. Somebody said, "So long, Clag."

And Tass Munger offered, "Sand in your craw, boy."

Jack Porter left last, saying, "Guess I might as well tail along and watch developments, Clag. You better get some rest. You look beat out."

CLAG mustered a grin for Munger and a handshake and thanks for Porter. He stood watching them cross the yard, hats pulled low, neckerchiefs high. Halfway to the shed they vanished in the brown swirl, one by one, like wraiths, swallowed up by the storm. This was one hell of a duster, a regular black blizzard.

He walked out to the kitchen. He had been braced for trouble, but there'd been no trouble. It had been easy. *Too darned easy!* Cal Tooley didn't just fold up like that. Clag should have known. He wasn't thinking well today.

Yet he knew he was thinking straight today for the first time in years, seeing his place in life steadily, clearly, with the eyes of a man instead of a kid with big dreams and big talk. Clag tried to remember what had happened in those minutes while he'd stood numbed by the loss of his Bar D. What had changed Tooley? He'd asked about the meeting at Maxine's. . . .

The wheat men's gathering! All in one place, for Tooley's convenience.

Clag seized his belt and gun from where it was hanging on the wall and ran for the stable. Inside of ten minutes he rode out, his wet neckerchief over his face, a soaked gunny sack fastened to Buck's bridle to give the horse like protection in breathing.

It was an eerie ride. The August winds came from the south, so they had to face into the teeth of it. Sometimes Clag could see ten yards, sometimes twenty. The noise of the wind and the driven sand made a solid wall of sound that drummed in the ears and beat against the brain. Light was vague, as if the earth were surrounded by a thin mud instead of atmosphere. Clag did not force Buck's pace. Get a horse breathing hard in this and you'd kill him.


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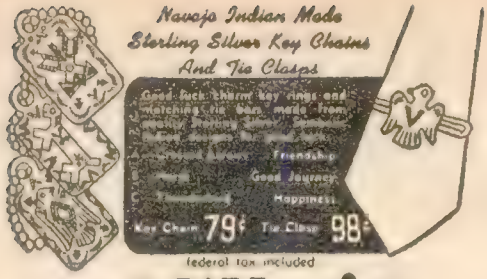


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## LLOID JONES

Halfway to town a new sound reached his ears, a muffled thudding that rode the wind vaguely. Gunfire ahead! Clag shielded his gun with his handkerchief as best he could and checked the loads and the mechanism, freeing the weapon of clogging grime.

The shots grew louder, and Clag urged Buck a little, riding with his gun buttoned inside his shirt. Then suddenly he realized the fight was off to his left, rather than dead ahead. He reined around and quartered into the wind, riding with every sense alert, straining his sand-raw eyes.

In this muck he couldn't tell where he was, what was going on. Then a few yards off he saw a vague shape running, firing a rifle, and running again. Clag dropped from saddle and brought out his gun, not knowing whether it was friend or foe.

The man looked around, and Clag recognized one of Woek's hired thugs, a drifting street brawler picked up in the backwash of the boom purely for his toughness. Clag fired and missed. The man whirled.

"Mick!" the man yelled. "Woek!"

The traveler ran back towards town, a faint yell fading down the wind as he fled. Clag got only ". . . whipsawed!"

Clag saw another figure, and another. They fired at him, turned, and fled, vanishing ghost-like in the brown billows.

Clag figured it out then. Woek's hired guns had been at the wheat meeting. When Tooley had led the vigilance crew in, they had run itno a hornets' nest. They'd been outnumbered, forced back. Hare and hounds through the smothering gale.

And Clag had ridden unknowingly into the midst of the wheat men, flanking them. He strode on, at right angles to the battle, firing at every vague shape he saw, not aiming too close. He didn't have to.

MEN LOOKED up, saw him and ran, sometimes snapping a shot at him, sometimes not. Clag reasoned that the legitimate wheat growers were not gun-fighters, and Woek's hired toughs had no taste for an odds-on fight. They supposed he led a party.

He kept moving on, in a crouch, warily, sustained by the urge and thrill of battle, thinking in a corner of his mind that he was ruining any chances for peace and co-operation in this country. He fired at another figure. Something yanked off his hat. Instinctively he dropped to one knee, peered around. Tracy Woek! The wheat king was at one side of him, rifle to shoulder.

Clag snapped a shot. He had a brief glimpse of the hatless figure, the golden hair wild and matted with dust, the savage eyes, the fancy saddle clothes wrinkled and caked with dust and sweat. Then Woek turned and ran.

Without thinking, Clag leaped after him, without, for a moment, knowing why. Woek was only one gun.

Then he knew. Woek was responsible for this hell, Woek, and a hundred of his kind who had stripped the flesh from the prairies, laying bare the bleached bones of destruction. With hired plows and hired guns he had wrung his riches from the sweat of a thousand men and a thousand years of nature's slow building. Wearing his fancy clothes, eating good food and drinking good Bourbon, rolling across the land in his slick convertible or sailing over it in his haughty plane, he had been high and mighty, not seeing, and not caring if he saw, that he was leeching the life's blood from a region to indulge his sporty tastes. Clag knew a terrible, hot urge to kill.

It was not like Woek to run, though. Clag floundered after him, little drifts of loose dirt and weeds making the footing uncertain. Woek came to view again, closer. He held the rifle across his body, working with it as he ran. Struggling to reload, he ran because of an empty magazine.

Clag stopped, steadied himself, took quick aim, fired. The rifle flew from Woek's hands, its stock splintering. Woek staggered. Clag moved in, yanking the scarf from his face, feeling the pull of his mouth in a flat snarl. Woek turned to face him, waiting.

"You had your shot, Woek," he croaked. "A good hunter wouldn't have missed with

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a three-hundred rifle at twenty yards."

"Goddamn dirt blinded me!" rasped Woek. He cursed the dust and the country in a terrible, flat monotone. He stepped backwards.

"Stay away from that rifle!" Clag warned.

"You better shoot," sneered Woek, "Or you won't live to regret it."

Clag unfastened his gunbelt. "How are you for guts. Mr. Woek?" he inquired.

WOEK CAME forward rapidly in a crouch, hope gleaming again in his pale, red-rimmed eyes. Clag tossed belt and gun aside and leaped to meet him, savage joy pounding in his pulses.

They met with a crash, and both staggered. They bored in again, toe to toe, smashing, grunting at the impact, two monarchs deciding supremacy.

Clag took a crushing right cross. It had been aimed for his chin and fallen short. It seemed to shatter his collar bone. His breath came with pain. He blasted at Woek's face. Woek gave ground. Clag leaped. Woek kicked, and Clag, twisting, took it on the hip instead of the groin. It was dirty, brutal fighting, with no quarter asked and none given.

Clag shifted his attack, aiming for the belly. If Woek was vulnerable, it was there. Clag's head rang with ripping smashes, but his man bent. The steel-trap mouth came open. Clag hammered him to the ground. He came up, and Clag beat him down again. Woek came up slowly this time, first to his knees, then gathering his feet. There was a crimson streak at the corner of his mouth.

A new sound rose above the storm. A motor, and Clag was sick that he had thrown aside his gun. He dared not look away from Woek.

"Stop it!" came a sharp cry. It came in a feminine voice, but high and not pretty. "Don't move, or I'll shoot! So help me!"

Clag looked, then. It was Maxine Farley, leaving Woek's maroon convertible, carrying her shotgun level. Her bright hair

streamed raggedly in the wind, her print dress whipped about her, revealing flashes of white thigh.

"Get your hands up, Clag," she screeched, and before the mad look in her eyes he raised his hands, shoulder high. "Tracy, get in the car. The sheriff's— Tracy!"

For as Clag raised his hands Woek charged. Snarling desperation glazed his features in a mask of hate. Clag jerked down his fists, but it was unnecessary. Maxine leaped between them.

"Tracy!" she cried, bringing him to a halt. "Tracy, it's no use. It's not worth it. This country is done for. You're a man, Tracy. You don't fight for a lost cause. Leave that to the kid. You know what's worth having, Tracy. This is worth having."

The arm with which she had been pushing against his chest went on over his shoulder. She moved against him. The shotgun fell to the dust, and she clung to him, bringing his face down to her own.

Another car loomed out of the storm abruptly, and Paul Tatum climbed out. Clag thought, bitterly, *I stayed too long.*

"I warned you hellers!" boomed the sheriff. "Now I'm takin' you in. Got me a jailful of hired hands already, and you kingpins will do to stuff the cracks. Since the whole damn country's not big enough for the two of you, we'll see if you both fit in one jail."

Woek said slowly, "If the crowding bothers you, Sheriff, I'll be glad to relieve the congestion."

TATUM shifted his gun to center on Woek's belly. "Don't try any funny stuff!" he growled. "Stand clear of Maxine and keep your hands away from you. Got an idea of pullin' a hide-out gun?"

"I'm unarmed," Woek told him. "What I mean was that I'm ready to leave the country. For good. If that suits your purpose as well as jailing me for disturbance or disorder or whatever."

Tatum stared. "You mean that?"

"With Maxine," Woek nodded. "She hates the place worse than I do, and it's

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a harder country on women."

"You can say that again!" Maxine declared fervently.

"I've got some ready money," Woek went on. "Frank Tolliver can dispose of my holdings and send me the money. We'll go inside an hour if you say so."

"I say so," Tatum answered with surprising promptness. "Get the hell out of my jurisdiction and don't ever come back!"

Clag stood with Tatum, watching, until the low-slung car vanished in the dust. He lifted his shoulders. "I've got no intention of leaving, Paul," he said.

"You're ready to head up an organization to take on the job of settling the dust, I hear," Tatum told him.

"Where'd you hear that?"

One of the independent wheat growers called me. Said this duster'd convinced 'em somethin' had to be done. And you made a suggestion. . . ."

"I've fouled that up while you were gettin' here," Clag said. "Shot my way through the whole crowd."

"Not the wheat men," Tatum corrected. "Nobody but Woek's strong-arms followed Tooley and the local boys out of town. I think my deputies have got 'em pretty well rounded up by now. We'll let the natives cool off in the stony lonesome for a few days, and ship the drifters out, and that about puts a quietus on it."

"You mean we still might get an organization going?"

"Might," Tatum said soberly. "Won't be all moonlight and roses ahead, but—"

"But we can work on it," Clag finished. "You takin' me in, Paul?"

"Go on home, I guess," Tatum said.

The brown fog was still lashing the Bar D when Clag rode in. A vast weariness weighed on him, and he moved stiffly, holding himself up by sheer will, so that he did not see a car parked in a sheltered corner between two sheds.

He opened his door to find Lorrie and Bill Talbot in the kitchen. He stopped short. "We came over to pick up the pieces," she said brightly. "But it looks as if there'd been no blood shed."

## DREAR HERITAGE

"I got to thinking I should have come with you," said Bill, "though I take it you got rid of 'em peaceable."

"No," said Clag. He sank heavily to a chair and told them what had happened. "It may be," he finished, "we can still make some headway. If enough will stick out the tough going."

"May I fix you some food?" asked Lorrie. "You've probably forgot when you ate last."

His eyes followed her as she moved to the pantry with her free, light step. He looked about the kitchen. She had a teakettle boiling, wet newspapers stuffed around the window cracks, a soaked sheet hung over the south door. The air was almost clean.

"When the wheat men learn Woek has run out," Bill said, "most of 'em will either follow suit or swing over to your way."

"This is not what I'd always planned," Clag said. "Lorrie!"

She turned. "Am I included? I can stick it out."

He rose quickly, the soreness and heaviness draining out of him. "The Bar D won't amount to much."

She crinkled her nose. "*I* like it."

In three long strides he crossed the room, a hint of the old challenging grin on his face. "Then," he promised, "there'll always be a Bar D." Disregarding Bill Talbot, he folded her carefully in the circle of his arms. Presently she brought her lips close to his ear and whispered, "Always."

***The End***

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